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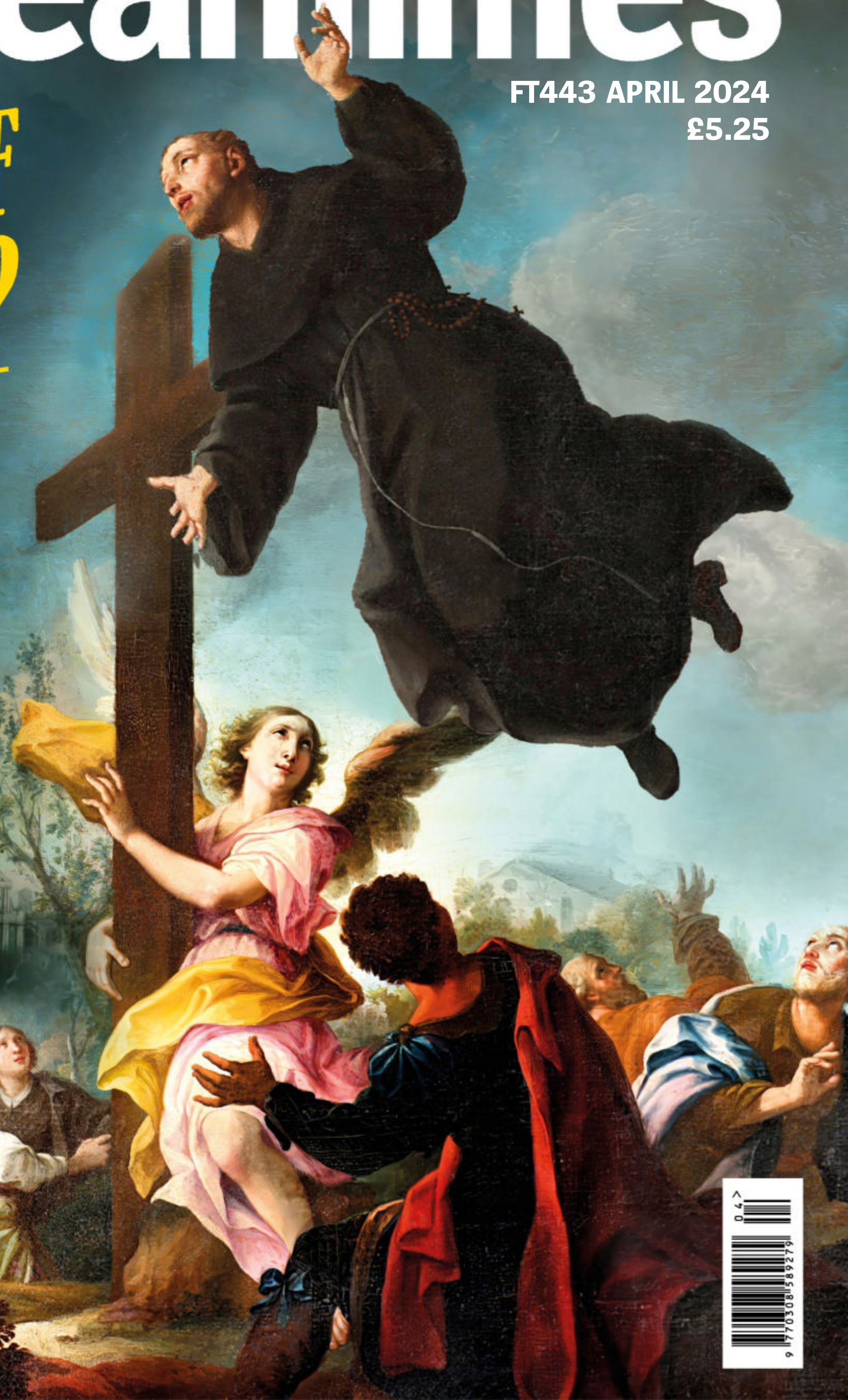

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CAN THE LEVITATIONS OF SAINT JOSEPH OF COPERTINO BE EXPLAINED?

IN SEARCH OF THE LIRPA LOOF

WHEN ESTHER RANTZEN PULLED OFF TV'S GREATEST CRYPTOZOOLOGICAL HOAX

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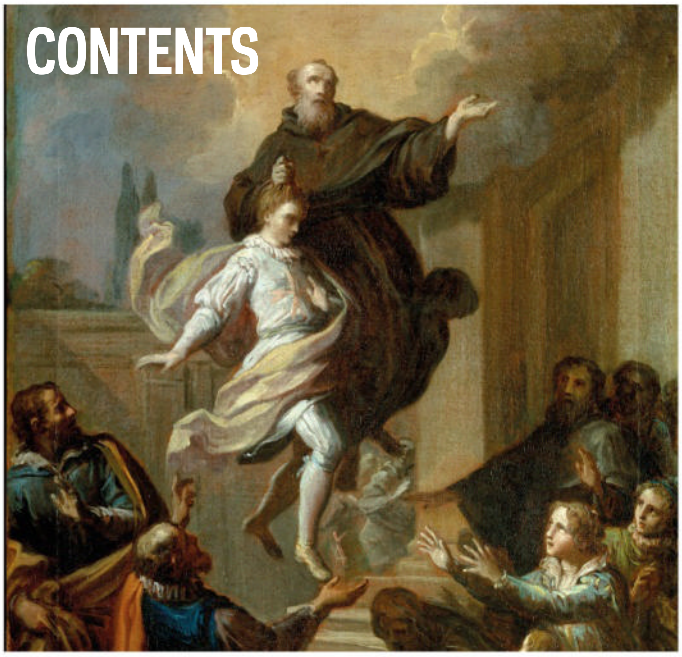

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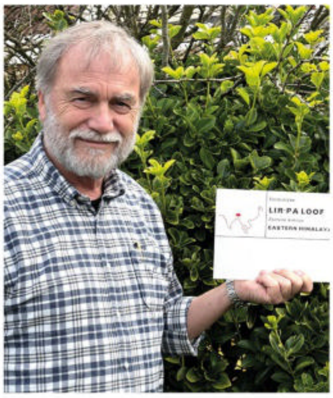

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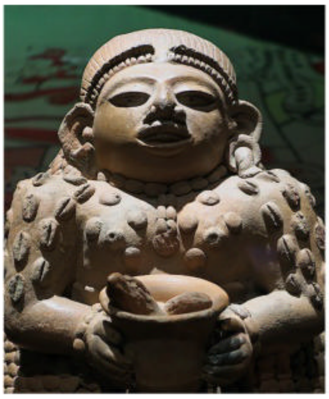

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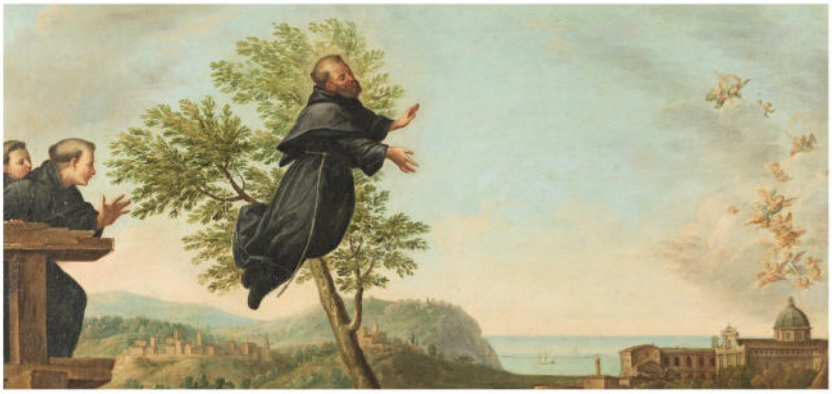
EDITORIAL

CAPUCINE DESLOUIS



BONHAMS

FLYING OFF FOR EASTER?

Welcome to our Easter issue, in which we are pleased to publish a major new article by FT founder Bob Rickard tackling the thorny issue of 'explaining' the apparently miraculous. Saint Joseph of Copertino was a 17th century Capuchin friar – untutored, humble, deeply religious and prone to religious ecstasies of an unusual nature: seemingly spontaneous feats of levitation that took place on a regular basis and sometimes observed by multiple witnesses.

Celebrated US 'skeptic' Joe Nickell (of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry) believes he has been able to 'explain' Joseph's levitations, but, for Bob, his approach is reductive, disingenuous and filled with dubious 'straw man' arguments and condescending attacks on witnesses. What, then, to make of the 'phenomenal surreality' that Joseph's rapturous flights, defying all known laws of physics, represent? That will be a matter for readers to decide – or not to decide – for themselves, but we hope that this critique of Nickell's approach will stimulate lively debate.

Elsewhere, Lisa Gledhill examines the strange relationship between Easter and chocolate, Bob Fischer excavates a forgotten April Fool from 1984 – a classic cryptozoological TV hoax hatched by Esther Rantzen and London Zoo – and Brett Taylor explores the origins of *Ghostbusters* – making its cinematic return with a brand new sequel – in the Spiritualist family and longtime paranormal advocacy of comic actor Dan Aykroyd.

Plus, we have celebrities aplenty – from Taylor Swift, who finds herself at the centre of a series of conspiracy theories involving everything from Deep State psyops to Satanic rituals – to Toyah Wilcox, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Jeannette Winterson, who have all spoken to the press about their haunted houses. Happy Easter!

WEIRD WEEKEND NORTH

Our friends in the North have reminded us that this year's Weird Weekend North will take place in Rixton-with-Glazebrook over the weekend of 27-28 April. On offer is an enticing range of speakers and topics, with contributions from FT regulars such as Claire Davy (aviation ghosts and Flight 401), Rob Gandy (the Ruskington Horror), Richard Freeman (cryptids in Tajikistan) and Bob Fischer (portals in children's fiction). Other talks will include folk linguistics from Mark Newbrook, the Hollow Earth from Nathan Jackson and the Leeds Dripping Riot from Steve Jones. There's lots more, and extra speakers to be announced: go to www.weirdweekendnorth.com/ for further details and to purchase tickets.

ERRATA

FT440:4: An amusing mix-up in the 'Magic Bullets' report, looking at the JFK assassination 60 years on, was brought to our attention by reader Alistair Smith: "I noticed the error in the caption stating John Landis was in the photo with President Kennedy. I got momentarily excited at the thought of a potential new movie, 'An American Werewolf in Texas'. Needless to say, Kennedy would be the Werewolf and poor Oswald was just trying to protect everyone." The Secret Service agent in question, author of the book *The Final Witness*, was of course Paul Landis, not film director John Landis.

FT440:43: Venerable Magonian John Rimmer wrote in to correct some errors in David Clarke's summary of the Jimmy Carter UFO sighting and its aftermath: "I am contractually obliged to point out that Grenada is not 'a small Caribbean island republic', and Eric Gairy was Prime Minister, not President. Grenada is a 'Commonwealth Realm' and the Head of State at the time of the UN UFO debate was HM Queen Elizabeth II."

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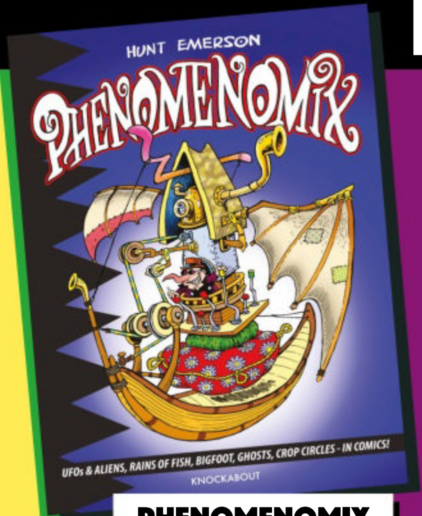
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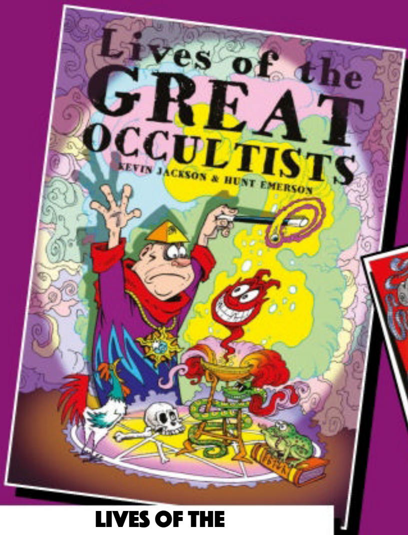
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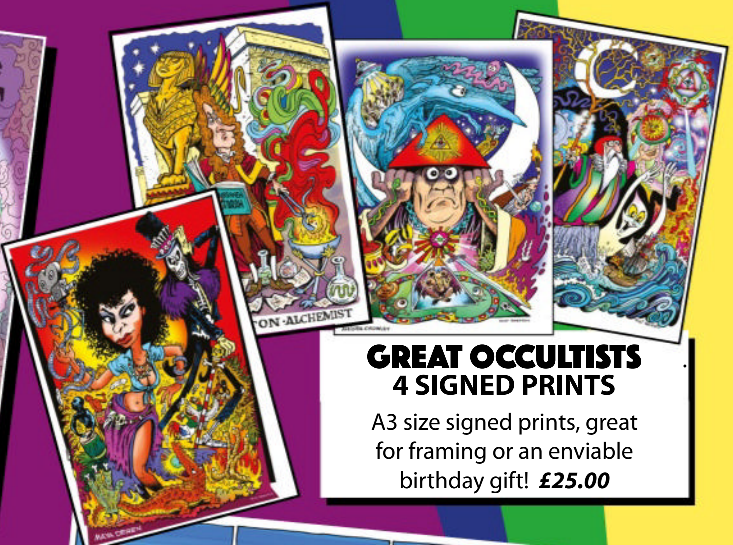

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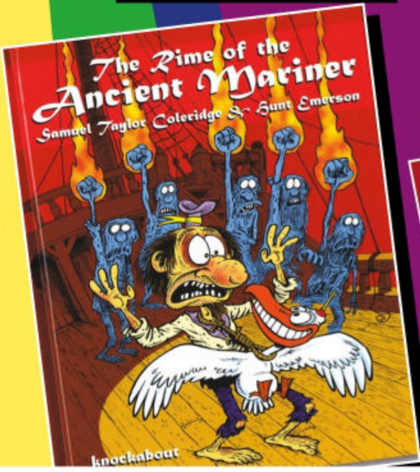
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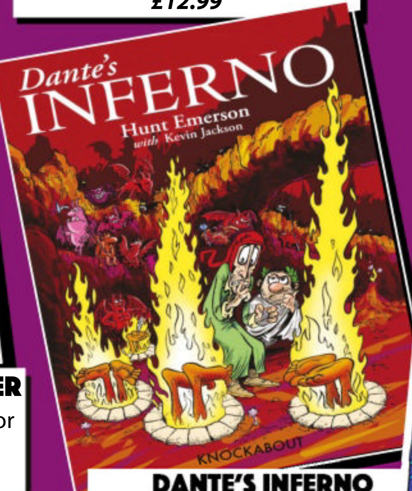
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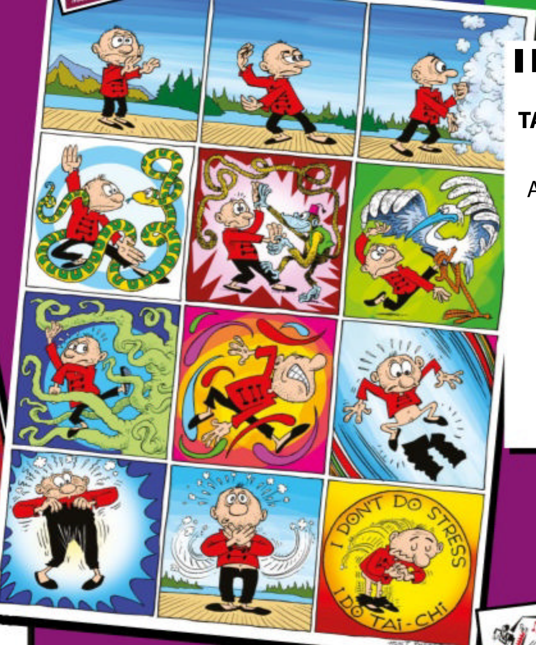
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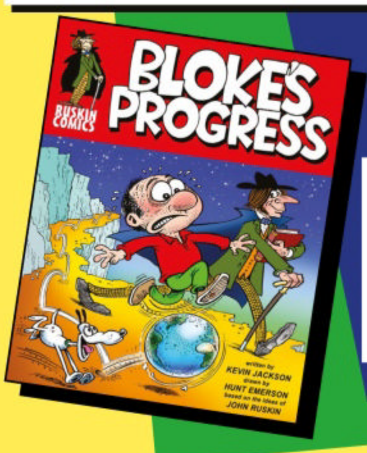
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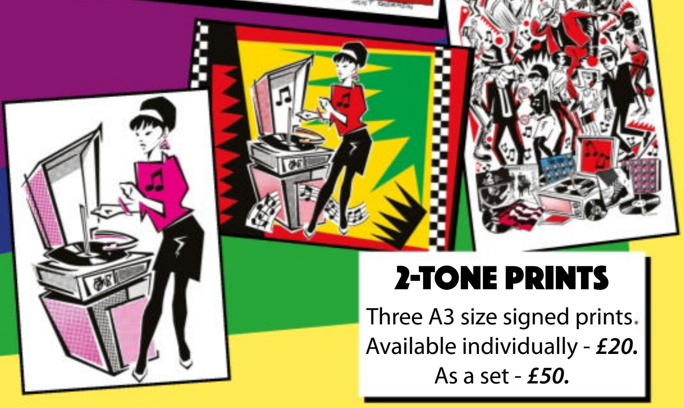

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A DIGEST OF THE WORLDWIDE WEIRD

STRANGE DAYS

SATANIC TAYLOR SWIFT

Is the world's biggest pop star in league with the Devil – or maybe the Illuminati?

AUSTRALIAN ASSOCIATED PRESS / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Taylor Swift has become a magnet for bizarre conspiracy theories.

With her continuing and massively popular *Eras* tour, its accompanying blockbuster film and an intense album release schedule, Taylor Swift is inarguably today's biggest pop star, and quite possibly the biggest there has ever been. A billionaire from the proceeds of all this, by rights she ought to be at the "pet chimp and personal theme park" level of eccentricity by now, but against all odds she projects a slightly bland image of grounded sensibleness and has an inclination towards socially conscious low-key generosity in the George Michael mould. This, along with her ubiquity, makes her an ideal canvas upon which others can project their fantasies, not least that Swift is a pawn of the Illuminati (see Conspirasphere, p.11), along with Lana Del Rey, Beyoncé, Rihanna, Kesha and the late David Bowie. There are also conspiracy theories about Swift secretly authoring a cat-based spy comedy film, being a covert 4Chan bulletin board user who crowdsourced her cat's name from it (Swift likes cats) and a closeted lesbian, secretly promoting Covid vaccines and fixing the Superbowl for political reasons; but one of the most persistent is that Swift is an agent of Satan.

Shane Lynch, a former member of Boyzone, an Irish boy band briefly popular in the 1990s, and, following a period immersed in the occult, now a born-again Christian, has claimed that Swift is a follower of Satan who performs Satanic rituals as part of her shows. He says: "You watch one of her shows and she has two or three different demonic rituals to do with the pentagrams on the ground, to do with all sorts of stuff on her stage." Lynch sees her as the leading exponent of what he believes is a worrying trend. "A lot of the artists out there, a lot of their stage shows are Satanic rituals live in front of 20,000 people without them realising and recognising," he says. "You'll see a lot of hoods up and masks on and fire ceremonies". He also condemns Sam Smith and Beyoncé as "so demonic it's unbelievable". Lynch asserts that when he was in the music industry, albums routinely had Satanic prayers said over them to ensure success, and that he witnessed this. He shuns entire genres, particularly hip-hop and grime, for their Satanic associations, explaining that "there is a lot of hidden Satanic [sic] and a lot of evil within them, including down to the beats. It's very real."

> *"Their stage shows are Satanic rituals in front of 20,000 people"*

In this, Lynch is not saying anything particularly new. Swift has been repeatedly accused of making Satanic horn gestures from the stage – in fact she is making the American sign language symbol for "I love you", which is a horns gesture with the thumb extended and has nothing to do with the Satanic gesture beloved of metal fans. (You can, though, buy an unofficial Metal-style Taylor Swift inverted pentagram T-shirt in several designs.) Last November, US conservative commentator Hank Kunneman accused Swift of turning her concerts into Satanic rituals, primarily because of her use of the "horns" gesture, and went on to insinuate she had links to vaccine manufacture Pfizer for good measure. Diocese of Nashville exorcist Father Dan Reehil has also expressed his concerns about the "Satanic" nature of Swift's shows, saying he believes her performance of the song Willow mimics witchcraft as it involves earth, fire, black capes and orbs. "The problem with the concert is that whether Taylor knew she was trying to imitate witches or in fact was doing some kind of a cult ceremony during the show is sort of irrelevant to the demons," he said, advising people to skip her concerts, adding "these little girls who you know literally sort of worship her who are now putting themselves in a position where they could be attacked by demonic forces."

Swift has not always helped with countering such wild speculations. At one point, talking about her *Eras* tour to audiences on X (Twitter), she said: "I've been watching videos of you guys in the theatres dancing and prancing and recreating choreography, creating inside jokes, casting spells, getting engaged, and just generally creating the exact type of joyful chaos we're known for," which had her right-wing critics claiming this was Swift explicitly endorsing Satanic witchcraft. Her appearance at this year's Super Bowl, where the latest of Swift's high-profile boyfriends, American footballer Travis Kelce, led the Kansas City Chiefs to victory, also fuelled

A VERY TIDY POLTERGEIST

The phantom of *The Phantom of The Opera*

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SEARCHING THE SKIES

A new age of astronomical discoveries

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TANTALISING TLALMIZTLI

Yet more Mexican mystery cats

PAGE 20

ZEENA SCHRECK

SIPA US / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE LEFT: Zeena Schreck – Taylor's mum? **ABOVE RIGHT**: Swift congratulates her boyfriend Travis Kelce on his Super Bowl win.

the speculation. During the game Swift again reportedly made horn gestures and was accompanied by the rapper Ice Spice, who was wearing an inverted cross necklace and a black top with batwing sleeves, into which conspiracy-watchers read sinister meanings.

Indeed, the idea that Swift is an agent of Satan has deep roots; as far back as 2013, Joseph Jackson, 28, was arrested at a Swift show in Pittsburgh for unveiling a poster saying "Taylor Swift is with Satan", and from early in her career there have been suggestions that she is connected to Anton LaVey's Church of Satan. It is alleged that Swift is LaVey's secret granddaughter, an idea that hinges on her apparent likeness to Zeena Schreck, LaVey's daughter, a visual artist, musician and actor currently based in Berlin. Schreck was a prominent spokesperson for the Church in the 1980s, although she later left and became a high priestess of the Temple of Set and a leader in the Sethian Liberation Movement. To many on the evangelical right, this similarity is immensely telling, even though there is no evidence that Schreck gave birth to a daughter in 1989, the year Swift was born, and Swift's origins – she was born in Pittsburgh to parents who worked in the financial industries – are well documented. However, the conspiracy-minded account for this by suggesting that the real Swift was, at some point, replaced by a clone of Schreck to further the great Satanic agenda. Either that, or Swift is, in fact, transgender, and was originally Schreck's son, despite him being more than 10 years older than Swift's reported age.

Some see Swift's recent actions as moving the Satanic plot towards its intended climax. After Kelce's team won the Super Bowl, allegations on X (Twitter), attributed to an unnamed "televangelist from Arkansas", claimed that Swift's supposed forthcoming marriage to the beefy sportsman had been orchestrated so that she could give birth to the Antichrist and usher in the apocalypse. This has been met with considerable scepticism, with one replier commenting: "Must she do everything? And during a world tour?" Indeed, the Super Bowl seems to have become the nexus of all realities for Swift conspiracies; as mentioned previously, the conspiratorially minded have suggested that her relationship with Kelce was used to fix the game so the Chiefs won, allegedly to set the stage for Swift and Kelce to announce that they are backing President Biden for the 2024 election. This, in turn is supposed to be the outcome of a psyop engineered by the far left/Satanic/woke/Democrat powers that control the Pentagon. These, allegedly, have been controlling Swift all along, manipulating her career to ensure she reached a level of success from which she can wield hypnotic power over the susceptible American masses to do their bidding and unfairly deny Donald Trump his rightful place as president.

Throughout most of her career Swift remained silent about her political affiliations, leading many on the right to tacitly assume that as a white woman who began as a country singer, she was likely to support Trump. They were infuriated when she went on to support Biden for president in 2020, so are motivated to cast aspersions on her for political reasons, particularly given that opinion polls show that a significant proportion of the US electorate would be swayed in their voting intentions by Swift endorsing a candidate for the 2024 election. *samaaa.tv, 9 Nov 2023; churchpop.com, 27 Nov 2023; theguardian.com, 31 Jan; salon.com, 2 Feb; snopes.com, 12 Feb; belfasttelegraph.co.uk, 25 Feb; hypoerallergic.com, 29 Feb 2024.*

EXTRA! EXTRA!

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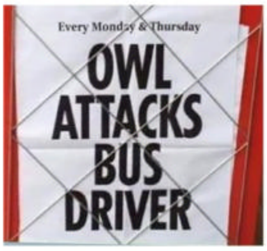

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Express & Echo (Exeter), date unknown.

Cardigan my friend knitted is witchcraft in wool form

Irish Times, 9 Aug 2023.

RULE CHANGE MEANS MORTGAGE PRISONERS MAY ESCAPE VULTURES

Irish Independent, 7 Sept 2023.

Moth welcomes 'change of era'

The Tablet, 13 Jan 2024.

WOMAN PAYS £175 TO HAVE HAMSTER STUFFED AS A POLEDANCING STRIPPER

walesonline.co.uk, 15 Jan 2024.

SIDELINES

TELEPORTATION?

Arriving at LAX airport in Los Angeles on a Scandinavian Airlines flight from Copenhagen, Sergey Ochigava was found to have no passport, visa, or ticket and there was no record of him travelling on the plane, despite the crew being certain he had been aboard. Interviewed by the FBI, Ochigava said he did not remember how he got on the plane, was not clear about where he was and did not understand what was going on. A statement from the airport said, "The CBP (Customs and Border Protection) officer had never encountered a situation where a passenger in the CBP inspection area was not in the CBP system," and the Department of Homeland Security, the FBI, Scandinavian Airlines, LAX and, apparently, Ochivaga himself, remain baffled as to how he got there. *404media.co, 11 Dec 2023.*

DEAD GOOD DEAL

An unnamed Alabama man successfully sold his mother's ashes on Facebook Marketplace for $30 (£24) plus postage. The sale included the cremation certificate but the story behind the sale was only available for an additional $5 (£4) – "I'm not reliving the trauma for free," said the vendor. *D.Mirror, 14 Oct 2023.*

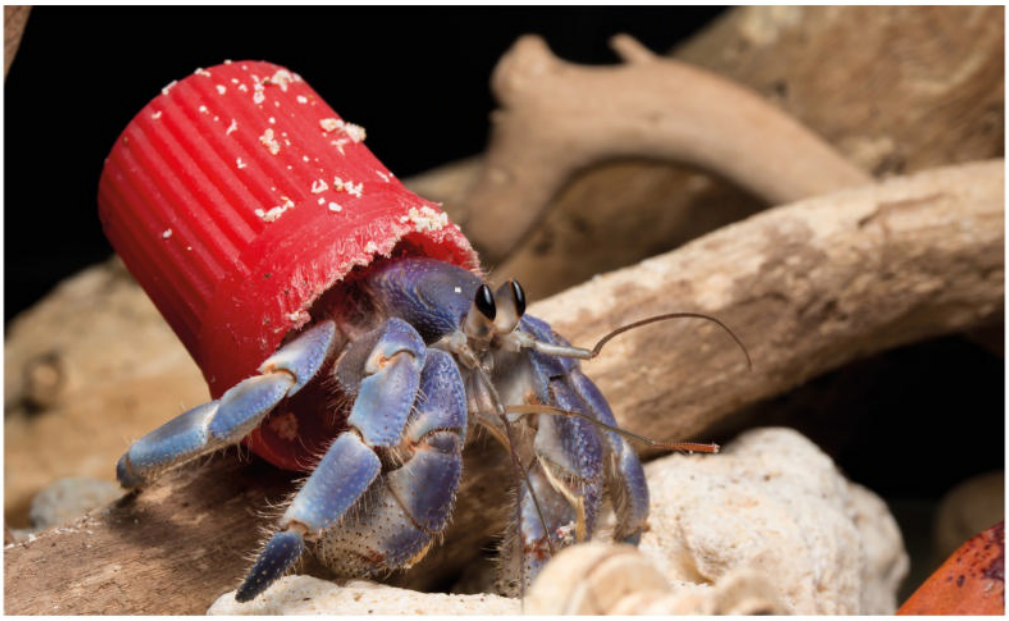
AMISH ALERT DISASTER

A test of the US federal emergency alert system for natural disasters proved to be a disaster for two Amish men in Ohio. Members of the strict religious sect reject most technology and are forbidden to carry mobile phones. However, the alert, which overrode any phone settings to sound a loud, vibrating alarm meant that their secret devices, usually kept on silent, rang out loud and clear, with the result that the two men have been shunned by the rest of their community. *D.Mirror, 14 Oct 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

ANIMAL NEWS

Hermit crabs turn plastic pollution to good use, plus a tortoise murder mystery



SXULLKIN ET AL, SCIENCE OF THE TOTAL ENVIRONMENT2024 / PHOTO SHAWN MILLER

ABOVE: A hermit crab with its red plastic 'artficial shell'. **BELOW:** Some of the mysteriously deceased tortoises found in Devon.

SHELL SHOCK

Marine creatures are making use of human pollution in creative ways. Two-thirds of hermit crab species have been found using debris that humans have discarded as 'artificial shells', instead of those left behind by molluscs.

In a study of hermit crab residences using photos taken by tourists and posted on social media and photo-sharing websites, Marta Szulkin, an urban ecologist from the University of Warsaw, explained, "We started to notice something completely out of the ordinary… Instead of being adorned with a beautiful snail shell, which is what we're used to seeing – they would have a red plastic bottle cap on their back or piece of light bulb."

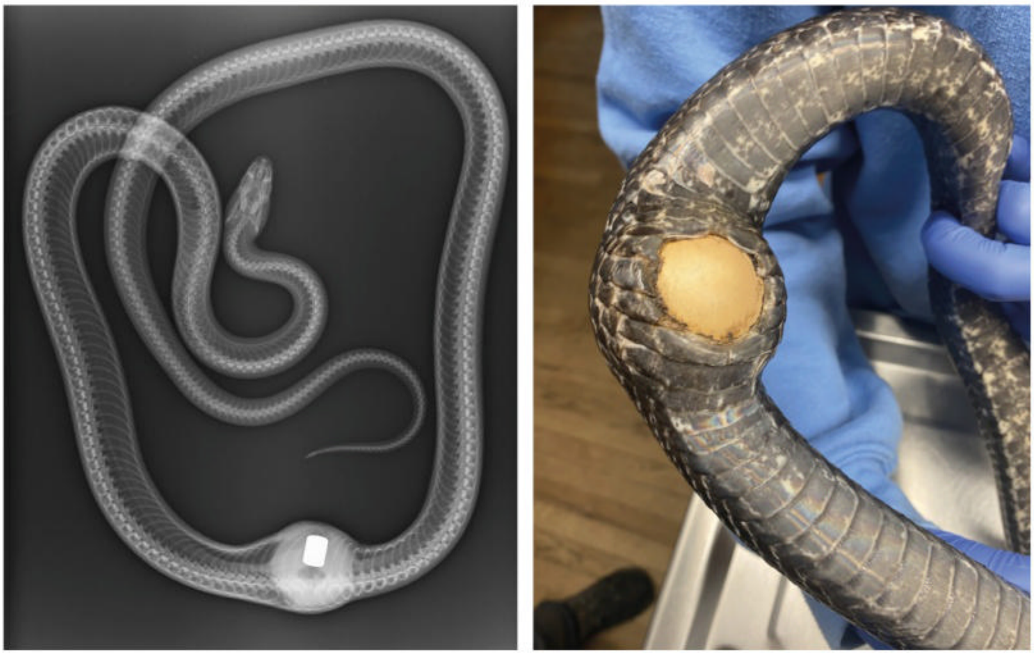
Szulkin's study found a total of 386 individuals using human junk as shells – mainly plastic caps. "According to our calculations, 10 out of the 16 species of land hermit crabs in the world use this type of shelter and it's been observed in all tropical regions of the Earth," she said. It is not clear whether using human debris as shells is harmful to the animals, and it may be helping them. As natural snail shells are in decline, it is possible that it might be becoming easier for the animals to find an artificial alternative, and the lighter, plastic 'shells' might even help smaller, weaker crabs to survive because they are easier to carry. *standard.co.uk, 27 Jan 2019; BBC News, 26 Jan 2024.*

Szulkin's study found a total of 386 individuals using human junk as shells

DEVON TORTOISE APOCALYPSE

National Trust staff at their Ashclyst Forest property near Exeter in Devon were reported to be "horrified" after discovering nine dead giant tortoises in their woodland. Two turned up on 8 January, then another five on 12 January, and two more in early February. The dead reptiles were identified as Aldabra giant tortoises, an endangered species found in the Galapagos Islands that can live up to 150 years and reach 1m (3.2ft) in length, making them one of the largest tortoise species in the world. They are not usually kept in captivity in the UK due to their challenging environmental and dietary needs, although there are a few in wildlife parks and private collections. None of the known owners, however, reported any animals missing. Police could find no immediate leads and said, "We would like to hear from anyone who has recently purchased a giant tortoise in the area or knows of anyone who normally has a large number of tortoises but has fewer now," and appealed to the public for further information.

As part of the investigation, vets planned to carry out autopsies on the dead reptiles to establish a cause of death and police were working with the RSPCA Wildlife Crimes Unit to try and find who was responsible. They suspect wildlife smugglers, but are baffled as to why they should be dealing in such



SECOND CHANCE WILDLIFE CENTER

ABOVE: This unfortunate rat snake had swallowed a gear stick knob that had worn through its skin. Thanks to the staff of the Second Chance Wildlife Center in Gaithersburg, Maryland, the snake has made a full recovery.

large, difficult, and conspicuous creatures for which there seems to be no obvious demand. Police later interviewed a man in relation to the incident, but no charges were brought, so how and why so many giant tortoises ended up dead in a Devon wood remains a mystery.

However, it is not the first time, though, that bizarre animal corpses have made an inexplicable appearance in the UK: in 1981 the headless skinned corpses of two 6ft (1.8m) bears were found floating in a canal in Hackney (**FT37:45, 200:30**) in an incident that has never been adequately explained. *BBC News, 17 Jan; devonlive.com, independent.co.uk, 8 Feb 2024.*

SERIOUS CICADAS

Cicadas are tree dwelling insects about two inches (5cm) long that spend almost all their lives as larvæ among the roots of trees, only emerging periodically in great numbers to mate and then die. They do so at intervals based on prime numbers, believed to have evolved to make it difficult for predators to match their breeding cycles. There are different "broods" of cicada found across the US, named with Roman numerals, based on their year of emergence and their location. Broods I to XVII are 17-year cicadas, while XVIII to XXX follow a13-year cycle. At each brood emergence, billions, and possibly trillions, of cicadas appear, and the males make a strident buzzing sound to attract mates; with such huge numbers of insects, this can be louder than a jet engine. After having spent so long underground, adults live just four weeks, and, according to the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, a 1990 cicada emergence resulted in "people in Chicago having to use snow shovels to clear their sidewalks of the dead cicadas".

April 2024 will see the simultaneous emergence of Brood XIX, the Great Southern Brood, and Brood XIII, known as the Northern Illinois Brood. These occupy adjacent territories, and it is the first time that their respective 13- and 17-year cycles have coincided since 1803. It will be another 221 years before they coincide again. "Nobody alive today will see it happen again," said Floyd W Shockley from the Smithsonian National Museum of Natural History. "That's really rather humbling."

Shockley estimates that the 16 states covered by the two broods will see more than one trillion cicadas emerge, which, if laid end to end "would reach to the Moon and back 33 times." Given that the two broods live adjacent to each other, Shockley says that: "Under just the right circumstances and with just the right number of individuals cross breeding, you have the possibility of the creation of a new brood set to a new cycle. This is an extremely rare event." For the appearance of Brood X in 2021, see **FT408:5**. *dnyuz.com, 19 Jan 2024.*

SNAKE KNOBBLED

A rat snake found in Maryland is being nursed back to health by the Second Chance Wildlife Centre in Gaithersburg, having been found with a gear stick knob stuck in its gut. Rat snakes love chicken eggs and will go for anything that is remotely egg-shaped, often being found with golf balls in their guts. In this case it was a two-inch diameter cue ball-like gear stick knob, which appears to have come from something like a tractor. As these objects cannot be digested, they block the snake's gut and are inevitably fatal unless surgically removed. In this case the snake had managed to survive so long with the knob in its gut that it had worn a hole through the snake's skin. Second Chance removed the knob and stitched the snake up, after which it made a full recovery. They are keeping it at the centre over winter and plan to release the now-healthy snake back into the wild in the spring. *thedrive.com, 29 Jan 2024.*

SIDELINES

FASCIST FAIL

During a session of the Canadian parliament attended by Ukraine's president Volodymyr Zelenskyy, MP Anthony Rota introduced a 98-year-old Ukrainian-Canadian as a "war hero" who had fought for Ukraine against Russia in World War II. Unfortunately, it later transpired that he had done so as part of Nazi SS unit, and Rota was forced to resign. *The Economist, 20 Sept 2023.*

A DOG'S LIFE

Coastguards attempting to rescue Lucy, a crossbreed dog stuck 150ft (46m) up a cliff in Swanage, Dorset, spent three hours trying to get to the animal before darkness fell. However, their activities spooked the dog, and she made her own way down. The "rescuers" then ended up chasing her for two miles along the seafront "like the Keystone Cops" until they realised that she was headed home and went to wait for her there. "It's incredible," said owner Helen Kimbern. *Sun, 19 Oct 2023.*

WHY?

The appropriately named Ed Currie, from South Carolina, has been granted the Guinness World Record for breeding the hottest chilli for his Pepper X strain. This comes in at 2.7 million Scoville Heat Units per chilli, compared to a maximum of 8,000 for a jalapeno. Currie, who also bred the previous record holder, the Carolina Reaper, reported being in severe pain with cramps for an hour after eating a whole Pepper X chilli. *The Economist, 21 Oct 2023.*

FOOTBALL STARS

With the Indian national football team battling its way through the challenging qualifying rounds of the Asian Cup, team coach Igor Stimac allegedly turned to astrology to pick his teams and is believed to have paid mystic Bhupesh Sharma more than £12,000 for his divinations. Stimac said he had been "convinced by others" to explore astrology's "possible effects in sport". Acting on the guidance of the stars, he left two of his most experienced players on the bench for a key match, but his team still won their three cup qualifiers to come top of their four-team group. *D.Telegraph, 13 Sept 2023.*

SIDELINES...

BEST EXCUSE EVER

An unnamed 22-year-old Belgian climber fell 130ft (50m) while scaling a cliff near Campan in southwestern France. He lay unconscious at the bottom of the cliff overnight until he was roused by the sound of his phone the following morning. It was his angry boss wanting to know why he hadn't turned up for work. Once he'd explained his situation, his boss told him to call emergency services from his phone as that would help them locate him, and this allowed a mountain rescue team to find him, suffering from extreme hypothermia and multiple fractures. *D.Telegraph, 7 Oct 2023.*

NO POO ALLOWED

A woman arriving at Minneapolis-St Paul Airport in Minnesota was found by customs officers to be carrying a small box of giraffe poo, which they confiscated. The owner explained that she had collected the fæces in Kenya and was bringing them home to make a necklace, having previously made one from moose droppings. Customs later destroyed the poo, warning that the owner risked contracting serious disease if she wore it as a necklace. It is legal to import giraffe fæces into the US, but it requires the correct permits. *news.sky.com, 6 Oct 2023.*

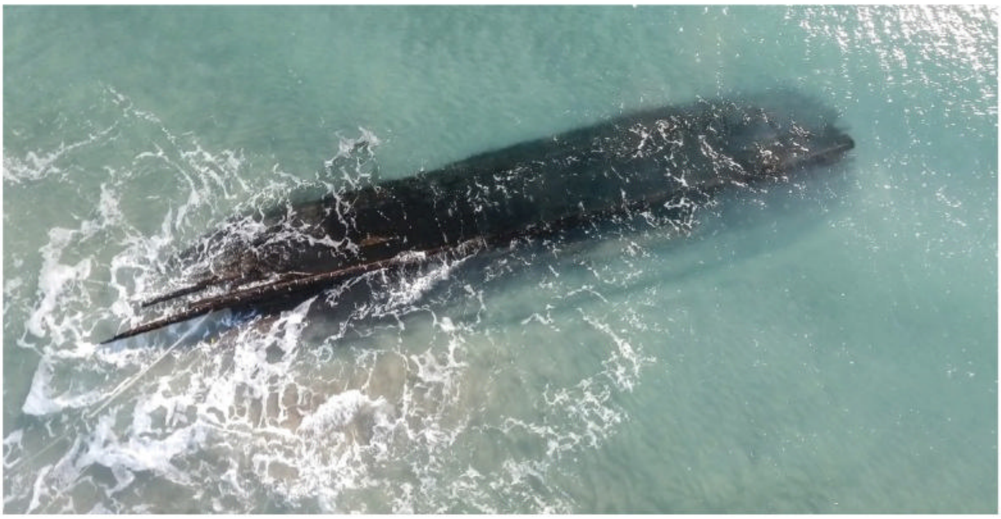
GETTING CROSS!

The Catholic charity that runs hospitals in Wisconsin and Illinois has said it will be removing crucifixes from its institutions as they are being used as weapons to attack its staff. *D.Mirror, 25 Nov 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

GETTING WRECKED

Mystery ships wash up – plus Cook's *Endeavour* identified?



COREY PURCHASE / AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: An aerial view of the shipwreck on the shore of Cape Ray, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada. **FACING PAGE**: The Mel Fisher Museum's copper dome, long believed to be a cooking vessel, is probably part of an early diving bell.

CAPE RAY CONUNDRUM

Gordon Blackmore from Cape Ray, Newfoundland, Canada, was surprised to spot a long shadow just off the local beach on an early morning walk on 20 January as there had definitely been nothing like it there a few days earlier. As soon as the tide had gone out, he returned to investigate with his mother Wanda. What they found was a 24-metre-long (79ft) shipwreck that had suddenly appeared in the bay; however, it was not complete, so the original ship had clearly been even longer. Called in to investigate, Neil Burgess, president of the Shipwreck Preservation Society of Newfoundland and Labrador, deduced that the ship was likely to date from the 1800s, as its planks were held together with wooden dowels known as trunnels that were used as nails in ships from that era. He also noted that the wreck contained copper pegs, each more than two centimetres (0.8in) wide, which had also been used to fasten the hull's planks together – again, something indicative of a 19th century origin. "It was a fairly substantial sailing ship, bigger than a schooner, I think," Burgess said, adding that if its hull is made of oak, which has yet to be determined, the ship wasn't built in North America. "This is perfect," Burgess said. "This is a great, great event."

> *There are 700 wrecks in the region from the same period*

The coast of Newfoundland is littered with thousands of wrecks, and it is thought that tropical storm Fiona, which hit the area in September 2022, may have dislodged the ship from the sands, with subsequent storms eventually clearing the wreck of its covering and making it visible again, although it is also possible that it washed out of the sands elsewhere and drifted into the bay where it was found. There are no records of a wreck this size off Cape Ray, so it may take some time to identify the actual ship and discover its story. There are concerns that storms could pull the ship back out to sea, though, while local resident Wayne Osmond said, "Some years we experience sea ice here, if that happens, within a few hours it can cause more damage to the wreck, crushing it, than a century or more of it submerged in deeper water."

The provincial government has sent a team to visit the wreck, with the hopes of identifying and possibly preserving what remains of the ship, but team archæologist Jamie Brake has poured cold water on the locals' excitement. He said that there are 700 wrecks in the region from the same period as the Cap Ray ship, so they already know a lot about vessels from that era and there wouldn't be much to learn from preserving this one. Given the size of the shipwreck, he added, it's "really impossible" to pull it out of the water while also keeping it intact. Locals, however, disagree, and are determined to rescue and preserve the vessel. *cbc.ca, 28 Jan, 7 Feb; theguardian.com, 29 Jan 2024.*

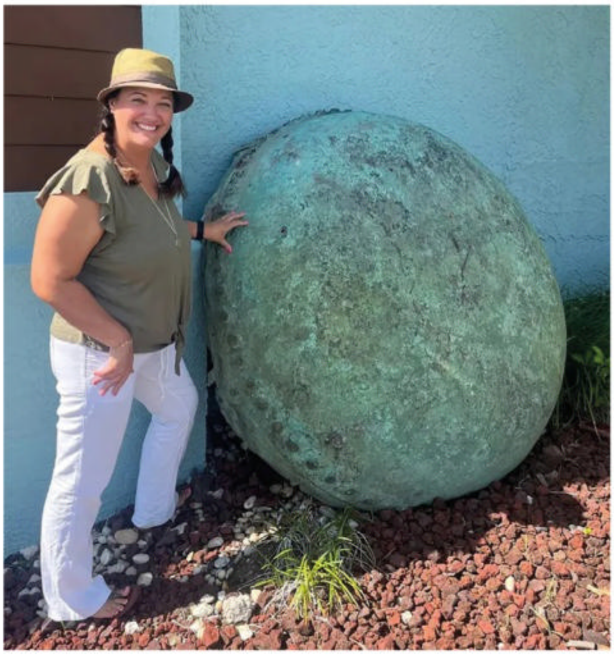
SANDAY SHIP

Sanday, in Orkney, has also been the site of a mysterious revenant shipwreck, although older and not so complete. A large, well-preserved section of a ship, built in a style that dates to the 16th century, has turned up in Cata Bay following winter storms. "It's possibly been buried because of the lack of marine algæ or anything on it, just further out at sea, and I think the last storm has brought it up," said local resident David Walker, who has examined and photographed the ship's remains. "It's very special. It's such a solid piece in fine condition." Sanday historian Myra Stockton has catalogued more than 200 shipwrecks around the island, dating back to 1596. "People here are wondering if it could be part of the Spanish Armada," she said. "We need an expert in historical wooden keels to help identify where this has come from." Walker says, "I think it's of national importance," and is concerned that unless it is removed and conserved it could deteriorate rapidly now it is exposed. "It's not going to be an easy task to undertake," he added. *BBC News, 21 Feb 2024.*

ANCIENT DIVING BELL?

A large copper dome that has been sitting in the Mel Fisher Museum in Sebastian, Florida, since the 1980s, where it had been thought to be an oversized cooking vessel, has been identified as being part of a primitive kind of submarine known as a diving bell. It was found near the wreck of the *Santa Margarita*, a Spanish treasure galleon that sank 40 miles (65km) off Key West in Florida in 1622, 160ft (50m) down. Research by marine archæologists Sean Kingsley and Jim Sinclair suggests that the 147cm (58in) diameter vessel is far too large for cooking and is unlikely to have been used for that purpose as there are no signs of charring on it. "Everybody was calling it a copper cauldron," Sinclair said, "but I've seen quite a few old wooden ships, and [cauldrons] didn't look anything like that." Made from two copper sheets, with a heavy rim studded with rivets all the way around, it does, however, fit descriptions of diving bells from the period. The object was also found near a pile of iron ingots that Kingsley and Sinclair believe were used to anchor it to the seafloor. Although there's no record of a diving bell being used to salvage treasure from the *Santa Margarita*, the salvager, Francisco Nuñez Melián, described casting one in 1625 in his writings, and Sinclair believes this is what they have found. He thinks the dome formed the top of the diving bell, which was completed by watertight lower panels, perhaps made of wood and leather covered by metal, that have since been lost. This would have made it big enough for three divers and it may have been connected to the surface by an air hose.

Attempts to salvage the *Santa Margarita* in the 17th century were successful, with Melián reporting the recovery of 350 silver ingots, thousands of gold coins and eight cannons from the wreck, which could indicate that a diving bell had been used, given the depth at which the ship rests. Joseph Eliav, a maritime archæologist at the University of Haifa, and an expert on early diving bells, believes the diving bell identification is "a plausible hypothesis," which would make it the oldest example ever found. *livescience.com, 7 Sept 2023.*



MEL FISHER MUSEUM

A WORTHY ENDEAVOUR

In February 2022, an Australian research team claimed that a shipwreck they had found off the coast of Rhode Island in the US was Captain Cook's famed *HMS Endeavour*, in which he made the European discovery of the Australian continent. At the time, this caused a rift with the Rhode Island Maritime Archæology Project with whom they had been collaborating, as they felt it was too early to announce the discovery. They felt more work was needed to confirm this really was Cook's vessel before going public. Now, though, the Australian National Maritime Museum team believe they can confirm the identity of the wreck. By the time it ended up in Rhode Island, *Endeavour*, a former coal ship, had been renamed *Lord Sandwich*, and was both out of date and in poor condition, so was one of five vessels scuttled by the British Navy to block entry to the port during the American War of Independence.

"We will never find anything on this site that screams *Endeavour*," said Kieran Hosty from the Australian team. "We will never find a sign saying, 'Cook was here.' We will never see a ship's bell with *Endeavour* crossed out and *Lord Sandwich* inscribed on it," he adds, but believes they now have more than enough evidence to make their case. The Australians say that samples from the ship show that the timbers are British, the size within millimetres of the *Endeavour's*, and the length of the keel within inches of survey measurements of Cook's vessel taken by the Royal Navy. "The stem scarph (a joint in the keel) is identical to what we know from the plans of *Endeavour*. We've gone through a whole bunch of ships' plans, and we can't find anything else like it." A further discovery they believe ties the wreck to Cook's ship is coal found in the bottom of the hull, possibly left over from its days as a cargo ship before it was converted for Cook's voyages. "I think it's just rattled down from when it was a collier and got stuck in the bilge," said marine archæologist James Hunter. *popularmechanics.com, 1 Dec 2023.*

SIDELINES...

MAN BITES CROC

Seized by a 10-ft (3m) crocodile at a billabong in Australia's Northern Territory, Colin Devereux, a cattle farmer in his 60s, said, "He shook me like a rag doll and took off into the water pulling me in." Fortunately, Devereux said, "My teeth caught his eyelid, I jerked back, and he let go." His brother drove him 80 miles to hospital for his serious injuries to be treated, while the croc was caught and "removed". "He won't be doing that again," said Devereux. *D.Mail, 10 Nov 2023.*

GNOME FEAR

Residents of Broughton, North Wales, have been mystified to find what has been described as "Christmas Gnomes" appearing in their front gardens. Police believe they may be bait used by burglars scouting to see if residents are home. They suggest that they are being put there to see if the homeowners remove them, and "if not, the property is likely to be empty and could be an easy target for burglaries." *D.Mail, 6 Sept 2023.*

TAKING THE P***

Australian punk band Private Function surprised fans who had ordered the limited-edition version of new album *370HSSV 0773H* with an announcement reading "Congratulations to the 50 people who ordered the 'Gold' version of our new record, you just bought a liquid disc full of our piss". They provided a video of the band emerging from a toilet, brandishing bottles of a yellow liquid as proof, and added: "Please don't use our DNA to commit crimes." *loudersound.com, 28 Mar 2023.*

HANDY EXCUSE

A woman named only as Maxine, a former artificial inseminator, is suing her employers for a work-related wrist injury. Age 21, she worked extracting semen from up to 30 pigs a day and claims the injury "was caused by having to hold the penis still, as the pigs move around a lot," with her lawyer adding, "An injury from repetitive movements and high workload can happen at any age." Now 31, Maxine says the injury limits her ability to do other jobs, including floristry, rubbish removal and demolition, and is seeking compensation for loss of earnings, medical expenses, pain, and suffering. *Queensland (Aus) Courier-Mail, 4 Jul 2023.*

SIDELINES...

GREEN MACHINE

Patrick Spina, 45, of Absecon, New Jersey, has been charged with criminal mischief after he was found to be behind a mysterious wave of dyed swimming pools in his local area in which more than 20 pools were found to have turned fluorescent green overnight. Spina is accused of using a drone to fly over his neighbours' pools to drop a harmless green dye into them. *Metro, 8 Sept 2023.*

A NAKED MAN…

When police in Stoke-on-Trent caught up with Joseph Severn, 26, they had trouble restraining him as he was extremely slippery, having covered himself in shower gel. He had been found cowering in bushes coated in gel, wearing only a jacket and, with his face smeared with fæces. As he was arrested, he attempted to insert a finger up his bottom. His ex-girlfriend had called police because Severn had broken into her flat, stripped, demanded sex, then turned on the shower, smashed several ornaments and jumped out of a window clutching a bottle of shower gel, fleeing semi-naked down the street. In court he claimed he "simply wanted a wash", but received a 21-month prison sentence for his eight-minute rampage. *Metro, 27 Sept 2023.*

PAN LIVES

A "massive" goat living on a hill in the middle of the Southeastern Freeway in Adelaide, Australia, has been dubbed "the Big Dipper billy goat" and gained fans from around the state, with a Facebook group started in his honour. Some regular travellers have dubbed the goat "a myth" but others have described sightings as "majestic" and "a near religious experience" with local resident Jeffery O'Connell saying, "Billy looks even more menacing up close, like a goat god." *Gold Coast Bulletin, 17 Aug 2023.*

MARTIN ROSS

NOT THE MOST HAUNTED

Well-behaved polt and naughty kids

DPA PICTURE ALLIANCE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Behind you! No phantoms, but Andrew Lloyd Webber was once plagued by a tidying poltergeist in his Belgravia home.

THE PHANTOM OF THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA

When asked by the *Daily Telegraph* about whether he had experienced any theatre ghosts, impresario and composer Andrew Lloyd Webber, who wrote the music for *The Phantom of the Opera*, a West End hit since its 1986 debut, confessed that he hadn't. He did, however, believe he had experienced a well-behaved poltergeist in his central London home in Belgravia, saying, "I did have a house in Eaton Square which had a poltergeist. It would do things like take theatre scripts and put them in a neat pile in some obscure room. In the end we had to get a priest to come and bless it, and it left." One social media wag reflecting on the story said, "When the paranormal is attempting to stop you writing your musicals you should probably listen." *theguardian.com, 3 Jan 2023.*

NO GHOST NEEDED

It only needed the rumour of a ghost to inflict far more damage than any polt could to Joanna and Matt Pittard's £1 million house on the Isle of Wight.

> *"It would take theatre scripts and put them in a neat pile"*

While the Pittards were away on holiday, a group of seven children, some aged only 11, broke into the building. They then destroyed paintings, stained glass windows, chandeliers and a grandfather clock, took axes, chainsaws and sledgehammers to every room, and smeared walls with bleach, oil paint and ketchup. They caused more than £300,000 worth of damage, resulting in criminal damage charges. Locals have reported spotting a ghostly figure in the windows of the house and the father of one of the boys involved in the mayhem said "The house isn't too far from where we live. I think they chose it because it was supposed to have a ghost." According to the book *Ghosts of Isle of Wight* by Gay Baldwin "Everyone in the district knows of the haunted room in the north gable, and of the wasted face of an erring maidservant who was locked in the room for punishment and died there." *Insider.com, 5 Nov 2023.*

PHANTOM FAKER

In Singapore, a court sentenced an unnamed 20-year-old man to 19 years in prison and 16 strokes of the cane for rape and sexual assault carried out under the pretext of exorcism. The man had developed romantic feelings for an old school friend, but was rebuffed because she was still in love with a former boyfriend. He then told her that he helped at a temple where he was a medium for the rabbit companion of Chinese mythological character Chang Er and that as a result, he could tell that her flat was full of ghosts. He then offered to carry out consecration rituals to rid the woman of the haunting. Initially he just used talismans, amulets and chanting, but he then persuaded the victim to take her clothes off and eventually to have sex with him as part of the "ritual". However, when she told friends about the "consecration", they advised her to go to the police, who arrested and charged the "medium". *straitstimes.com, 7 Sept 2023.*

THE CONSPIRASPHERE

Is the rise and rise of Taylor Swift part of a psyop to further the aims of the New World Order? And who, if anyone, killed Alexei Navalny? **NOEL ROONEY** looks for the clues...

THE SWIFT AND THE DEAD

She has 279 million followers on Instagram. Her last tour grossed over $1 billion, making it the biggest of all time. The movie of the tour grossed better than most Hollywood blockbusters. Apparently nearly one-fifth of Americans said that they would probably vote for a candidate that she endorsed; and to date, her favourite candidate is genial Joe Biden. The (self-described) 'reactionary feminist' Mary Harrington recently wrote that American conservatives are terrified of her.

All in all it's little wonder that conspiracists, especially those on the right, suspect her of being a tool of the Deep State. Taylor Swift (rumours that I had to ask my teenage sons who she was are entirely unfounded) is, according to a raggedy little poll seized upon by a few journalists with nothing better to do, the pivotal factor in the upcoming presidential election; you can tell how important she is if only by the simple fact that Joe Biden consistently remembers her name.

Some politicians have gone further. Scott Morrison, a veteran of the Australian political scene, in his farewell speech, insinuated the titles of a number of Swift's albums. He claims this was him having a bet with his daughters (presumably members of the 'Swifties', as the singer's fans are collectively known) but was it a coded message, hiding in plain sight, along the lines of Podesta pizza puns?

What struck me about an article in *Unherd* on Swift conspiracy theories was how innocent it all was. I did a cursory search for more sinister sources and immediately came upon a trove of articles proving that Ms Swift is a fully paid-up member of the Illuminati, as proven by, among other things, images of butterflies (cute harbingers of spring to the uninitiated, but symbols of mind control to those who know), Devil horns worn as a throwaway accessory, and covering one eye, a dead giveaway for Illuminati spotters (see **FT258:32-39**).

Butterflies are symbols of mind control to those in the know

Then there are the mirrors. Mirrors feature prominently in her videos and of course are a symbol of a split personality awaiting orders under the Monarch mind control programme. Fire, flames and lightning add to the mix; as does, for those with eyes to see, the inverted cross formed by the shadow of the airplane Swift and her footballer boyfriend fly in. The clincher is a tune, "Shake it Off", which, allegedly, is a pæan to the Illuminati from an empty head, hoovered and ready for instructions and orders.

So there you have it; Taylor Swift, epitome of bland, is more than a stalking horse for the embattled Democratic National Convention. She is the spearhead of the New World Order, shaping our minds with low-quality, high-turnover Kool-Aid. And even the journalists who write about it don't know the real story. You have been warned: shake it off.

In other news, the sudden death of Alexei Navalny in a Siberian prison has unleashed a torrent of theories. Mr Navalny apparently dropped dead while exercising in sub-zero temperatures. Or not. In the informational free-for-all that followed, his death took on a life of its own. First out of the blocks was the idea that he had been assassinated by a punch to the heart; this is/was, allegedly, a popular method among KGB and GRU assassins, and has lingered in the FSB. If that sounds like a plot device from a Jack Reacher novel, that's because it is; but its fictional origins didn't deter the anti-Putin conspiracists, a surprising number of whom turned out to be mainstream journalists.

This was immediately countered by the theory that the CIA had offed Navalny using a Ukrainian spy as a proxy killer. Which made President Zelenskyy's comment that it was "obviously Putin" a touch ironic. Which made the comment by the head of the Ukrainian secret service – that Navalny had clearly died from natural causes – more ironic still.

Then news broke that Navalny was due to be part of a prisoner swap involving a (real) FSB assassin only days after his untimely death. It is hard to see the logic of killing someone just as you're about to get rid of them, but that wasn't deemed relevant. Some pointed out that his death came hard on the heels of a significant Russian advance in Ukraine; burying bad news, in this rendition, was a matter of burying someone in the public eye.

At this point, it was inevitable that Navalny's previous alleged brush with Russian assassins, during which Novichok was apparently administered via a cup of tea (very Litvinenko), or perhaps a water bottle, or finally a pair of underpants, would pop up on the C-sphere radar. A man who could survive a dose of the deadliest nerve agent on the planet was hardly going to be troubled by a punch in the chest.

Actually, there is more to this historical connection. Navalny's emergency trip to a German hospital was at the height of the Covid scare. Hence, commentators averred, he must have received a vaccination, as it was compulsory in German hospitals at the time. And thus he was yet another victim of 'died suddenly' syndrome, and an innocent tragedy (to the extent that culling the human population via vaccine can be termed innocent) had inadvertently kicked off a conspiracy competition between interested (or at least self-interested) parties.

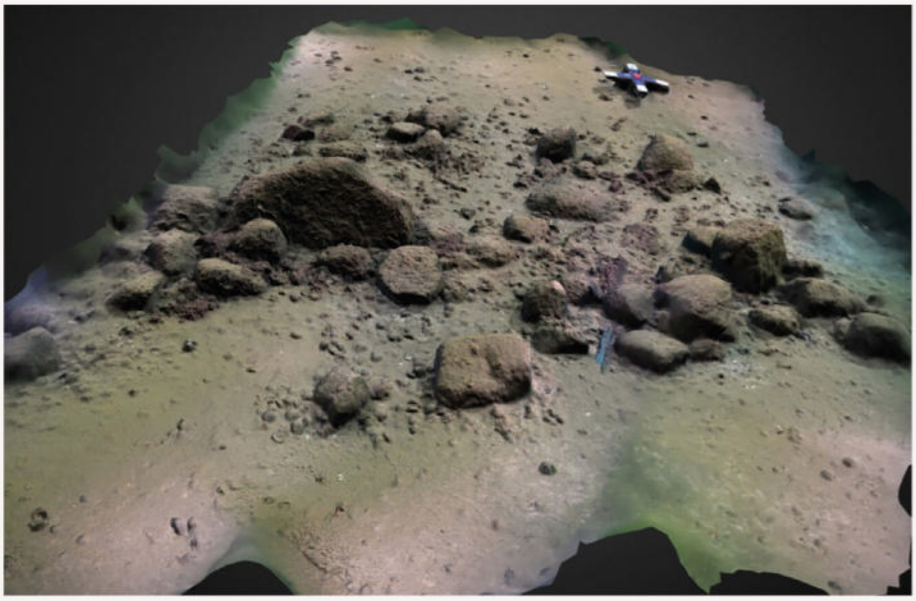
I'll return to the Navalny story in more detail, but for now, I was struck by the thought that such characters – politically divisive, manufactured hero to some and natural villain to others – are in a sense a mirror to the icons, the canonical martyrs, of conspiracy theory. JFK as angel, Navalny as devil: and a wallpaper songstress to bind them all – "Eyes Open" or "Anti-hero" is your choice.

https://unherd.com/newsroom/america-taylor-swift-conspiracy-theories-cant-resist/; www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-australia-68411764; https://whatculture.com/music/12-signs-that-taylor-swift-is-in-the-illuminati?page=13; www.zerohedge.com/geopolitical/alexei-navalnys-death-and-curious-well-timed-coincidences

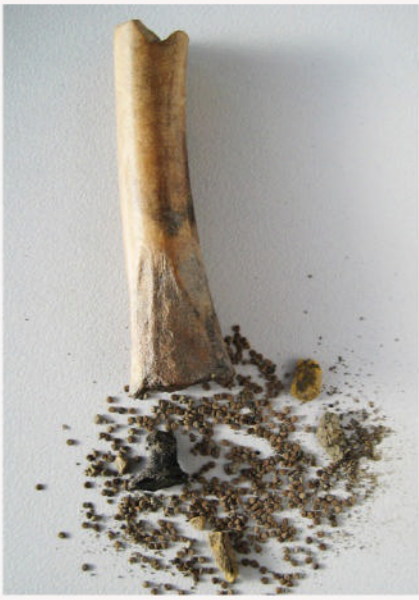
ARCHÆOLOGY

A MONTHLY EXCAVATION OF ODDITIES AND ANTIQUITIES

PAUL DEVEREUX discovers an underwater megastructure, bronze age lippy and a surprising bone



PHILIPP HOY, ROSTOCK UNIVERSITY



BIAX CONSULT

ABOVE LEFT: Part of the 'Blinkerwall'. **ABOVE RIGHT**: A henbane-containing bone, with its birch tar plug, and some of the seeds that spilled out. **BELOW**: The Bronze Age vial and a colour-enhanced microscopic image of the contained pigment's composition.

BALTIC BLINKERWALL

What has been styled as a 'Stone Age megastructure' has been discovered submerged 21m (69ft) below the surface on the Baltic seabed. It was found by archæologists using a multibeam sonar scan from an autonomous underwater vehicle (AUV) in the Bay of Mecklenburg off the coast of Germany, and is essentially a kind of stone wall (called 'Blinkerwall'). It consists of 1,673 stones that are mainly under a metre in height, placed side by side over a distance of almost a kilometre linking 300 larger boulders, showing deliberation rather than a random act of nature. Multi-disciplinary researchers estimate it was built by hunter-gatherers about 10,000 years ago on dry or marshy land after the ice sheet retreated, only to be eventually drowned in what is known as the 'Littorina transgression' around 8,500 years ago.

The purpose of this stone wall is as yet not fully determined, but is most likely to have been part of a hunting lane structure for driving deer into a nearby lake. Whatever, the researchers claim it "potentially makes it the oldest man-made megastructure in Europe". *Guardian 12 Feb 2024.*

Original paper in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences (PNAS),* published 12 Feb 2024. *(121 (8) e2312008121).* https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2312008121

LIPSTICK FOR BRONZE AGE LIPS

An overflowing river caused a flood that ripped through a Bronze Age cemetery in Jiroft, south-eastern Iran. The force of the water brought many artefacts to the surface, including a small, finely carved chloritic (green) stone vial containing a dark powder. Archæologists obtained the artefact (many had been looted locally) in 2001. Analysis showed the powder to consist of a mixture made up of crushed hematite, resulting in an original vibrant red colour, along with other minerals. Quartz particles were also in the mix, possibly to add shimmer, and traces of vegetable fibres were additionally detected, perhaps to provide scent. The archæologists note that the mix bears a "striking resemblance to the recipes of contemporary lipsticks". Radiocarbon dating yielded a date to between 1936 BC and 1687 BC, making it the oldest lip paint currently known of in the ancient Near East. *Original paper in Scientific Reports, vol.14, 1 Feb 2024.* https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-024-52490-w

MASSIMO VIDALE VIA SCIENTIFIC REPORTS / CREATIVE COMMONS

STRONG STUFF

German and Dutch researchers were sifting their way through the multitudinous finds from a more than 2,000-year-old settlement site – Houten-Castellum, near present-day Utrecht in the Netherlands – when one of the sheep bones that littered the site accidentally slipped (an oops-a-daisy moment) from the grasp of a researcher who was cleaning it. Fortunately, it turned out to be a very special bone: it had been deliberately hollowed out, plugged at one end with birch tar and packed with hundreds of black henbane (*Hyoscyamus niger*) seeds. The bone was slippery because it had been much resorted to in the past and was thus smoothed and polished by ages of handling.

If ingested injudiciously, henbane can be extremely, even deadly, poisonous (it is part of the nightshade, *Solanaceæ*, family) and contains various tropane alkaloids, but if used in appropriately small amounts by experts, it can be used medicinally (and has been from at least Roman times). Additionally, it can be hallucinogenic and was an important ingredient of witches' ointments in mediæval times because it can give the sensation of flying. Originally, it had clearly been a long-ago someone's stash. *Science Alert*, 13 Feb 2024. (For a more comprehensive account of black henbane's history and effects, see this columnist's *The Long Trip: A Prehistory of Psychedelia*, 2008.) Original paper in *Antiquity*, 8 Feb 2024. https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2024.5

CLASSICAL CORNER

FORTEANA FROM THE ANCIENT WORLD COMPILED BY BARRY BALDWIN

295: ROMAN ROAD RAGE

Actually, the earliest episode is Greek, in Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*. As Œdipus tells it (vv800-14) to his wife, this is how it went:

When I came to the place where three roads meet, I met a herald followed by a horse-drawn carriage with a man inside. The leader rudely told me to get out of their way, and his lord and master arrogantly said the same. The driver pushed me aside. I struck him in a temper. Sticking his head from the carriage, the old man saw this, seized the driver's two-pronged goad and cracked my head. I made him pay the price. Quick as a flash, I wielded the staff in my right hand, knocked him from the carriage and killed them all.

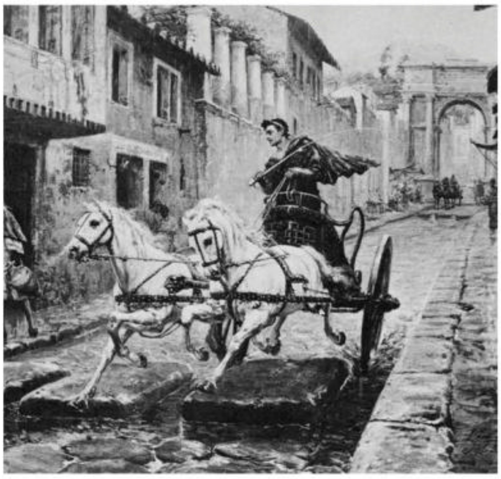
Nowadays, that staff would have been a baseball or cricket bat. This play is often dubbed the world's first detective story; it was Aristotle's favourite. Still, you might have thought that Œdipus, knowing he was prophesied to kill his father and marry his mother, might have hesitated before killing any man.

It is a safe bet that this scene was reflected often enough in real life.

The 64,000-dollar question: on which side of the road did Greeks and Romans drive? Down the middle, some think, many city streets in Pompeii and elsewhere being one-way – see S Tsujimara, 'Ruts in Pompeii,' *Opuscula Pompeiana* I. 58-9, and for a complete survey Cornelia van Tiburg, 'Traffic Policy and Circulation in Roman Cities,' *Acta Classics* 54 (2011), 149-71 (available online).

There seems general agreement that Egyptian, Greek, and Roman soldiers marched on the left. In 1998, archæologists discovered a double-track leading to a quarry near Swindon, whose deep left-hand depressions suggested that side.

Julius Cæsar passed a law banning traffic from Rome's streets between dawn and dusk, apart from such common-sense exceptions as builders' carts. Easy to imagine the night-time din (modern Rome has been dubbed 'The Infernal City') as a multitude of carts (no tyres, of course, to soften their rumblings) poured into and through the city's unlighted streets. Muleteers were well known for their noisy cursing, understandable in these conditions: accidents and punch-ups both verbal and physical must have been common.



"Only the rich can sleep at night," complained Juvenal in his Third Satire, a moan echoed by Martial (*Epigrams* bk9 no.68), who adds the extra racket beginning at dawn caused amongst others by bawling street-corner school-teachers – not work hours likely to be approved by the NUT.

Juvenal goes on with this graphic description of the jostling pedestrian crowds and a routine street accident: "Here's the mighty fir-tree trunk swaying atop a waggon, and another cart behind, piled high with pine-logs looming over pedestrians' heads. If an axle snaps and cascades a cartload of marble over them, what's left of their bodies? Who could ID bits of anonymous flesh and bone?"

There's no evidence of chariot commuter gridlocks. And, no evidence that anyone rode through Rome in carriages until the dignitary Plautianus (AD 205) who commandeered one when answering an urgent imperial summons. After that, they became a dangerous nuisance, laments historian Ammianus Marcellinus (bk14 ch6). Owners competed to have the biggest and best – my other carriage is a Porsche – and drove with both arms upraised to show off their latest flash clothes – nowadays, they'd be texting.

Different matter outside city limits. Juvenal in his *First Satire* (vv59-62) denounces a Roman Hell's Angel doing a ton down the Flaminian Way (main road to Rimini, still used with same name) to impress his 'moll': "Just watch this lout lashing his steeds like Automedon, reins clutched in one hand, showing off to his squeeze who stands next to him draped in his riding-cloak."

Automedon was an Homeric driver – older FT readers will think Stirling Moss. Visitors to Italy will realise nothing has changed on the Autostrade...

Accidents were no respecters of persons. Emperor Vitellius had one thigh smashed when hit in his youth by a four-horse chariot (Suetonius, *Life* ch17). Nero's father (Suetonius, *Life* ch5) deliberately speeded up on the Appian Way in order to knock down and kill a boy – how often have we seen this on a TV police drama?

Children were unsurprisingly often victims – for a full tally see C Laes, 'Children and Accidents in Roman Antiquity,' *Ancient Society* 34 (2004), 153-70. Several funerary inscriptions, prose and verse, record the young victims – texts and translations available online on the Petrified Muse website. One from Interamna tells how a nine-year-old rushed into the road to help his brother, stumbled, and was crushed by a wheel. Another records the death of lady Ummidia with 13-year-old slave boy Primigenius, both trampled by crowds on the Capitoline Hill. A third, from Ostia, preserves the memory of a little lad, out playing, whose careless parent let him wander into the road where the wheel-rim of a cart pulled by undisciplined oxen killed him – what a Twitter-storm that would cause...

A legal opinion in the Roman *Digest* (bk9 2.52) deals with the case of a boy killed by a collision of two wagons, whose father sought advice on what to do, suggesting there were traffic laws of sorts and legal redress for accidents.

For finale, a puzzler. Mary Beard (TLS, 15 March – The Ides – 2015, drawing on G Daux, *Bulletin de Correspondence Hellénique* 94 (1970), 609-18, quotes a Greek epitaph from Roman Macedonia which laments the death of *Choiros*, killed by a wheel. This word means pig (also slang for vagina). Animals, of course, usually cats and dogs, are no strangers to such fates, along with rodent road-kill. However, lest too many tears be shed over this pulverised porker, some epigraphists think the victim may simply have been a person called Choiros – so someone may have made a pig's ear out of this one...

All Roads Lead to Rome (Mediæval Latin proverb, dating from 1175). When in Rome Do as the Romans Do (St Ambrose). Ponder these axioms as you blench at the horrific road accidents in Jean-Luc Godard's *Week-End* (1967)...

The weird and wonderful sky at night

DAVID HAMBLING looks forward to an exciting new era of astronomical discovery

LEFT: The Vera C Rubin Observatory in Chile will search for "weird and wonderful objects" in our Solar System and beyond.

RUBIN OBSERVATORY / NOIRLAB / AURA / NSF /B QUINT

The Vera C Rubin Observatory is a new astronomical facility being built on Cerro Pachón ridge in Chile to search for what researchers call "weird and wonderful" objects in our Solar System and beyond. The observatory, known as VRO, starts work in 2025, and AI will sift through the vast amounts of data it gathers, promising a rich and strange harvest of anomalies.

Space, as Douglas Adams observed, is "vastly, hugely, mind-bogglingly big". There is a lot of night sky to observe, and only a limited number of observatories. This is why astronomy has always been such a fruitful field for amateurs: if you point even a small telescope at a patch of the heavens that nobody else is looking at, you might find something that nobody else has seen.

In earlier centuries, all new discoveries were made by more or less random stargazing. In 1572 Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe observed a new star in the constellation Cassiopeia, where there should not have been one. Others has reported new stars or novæ (from the Latin for 'new') before, but Brahe's systematic record of his observations "Concerning the Star, new and never before seen in the life or memory of anyone" challenged the accepted view of fixed and unchanging heavens. This led to a new interpretation of the cosmos.

In 1781 the British astronomer William Herschel discovered a new planet by accident. He was cataloguing faint, eighth-magnitude stars and noticed one that was moving relative to the others, a sure sign of an object inside the Solar System. Herschel initially assumed this was a comet, but later realised it was a seventh planet, the first to be discovered for millennia. To the delight of generations of schoolboys, the new discovery was given the name Uranus.

There are still too few observatories to see everything, and many discoveries are made by amateurs trawling the night sky. One such is Australian Terry Lovejoy, IT specialist by day, astronomer by night, with several new comets to his name, including Comet C/2014 Q2 (Lovejoy) which later briefly became bright enough to be visible to the naked eye.

The VRO will end the reliance on lucky accidents by scanning the entire heavens in a "Legacy Survey of Space and Time". This will take 10 years and thoroughly survey… everything. The giant 8.4-metre telescope will take pictures with a 3,200-megapixel camera, each covering an area the size of 40 full moons. Shifting every few seconds, the VRO will scan the whole sky every four nights or so. Successive images of the same patch of night sky can be compared to see what changed over time and pick out anomalies which might otherwise be missed.

> Shifting every few seconds, the VRO will scan the whole sky every four nights or so

The survey will involve unprecedented amounts of data, around 1.28 petabytes per year. This is so much that the project needs a special data pipeline from the observatory in northern Chile back to the data processing centre in the US.

Previous astronomical projects have used crowdsourcing to handle vast amounts of data. The Asteroid Zoo invites participants to examine images of moving asteroids to help narrow down their orbits, and Exoplanet Explorers uses volunteers to help identify possible planets in other solar systems. The volume of VRO data may be too great even for volunteers, so the researchers are harnessing AI.

Machine learning is revolutionising all sorts of fields (see **FT430:16**), in this case VRO researchers developed a type of software called a deep autoencoder to detect anomalies in their data, testing it against simulated scans of Legacy Survey of Space and Time data. The process was one of supervised learning, where a human researcher rated the autoencoder's success with each batch of data and it becomes steadily better at identifying which objects are truly anomalous. A paper on the work is entitled "The Weird and the Wonderful in our Solar System: Searching for Serendipity in the Legacy Survey of Space and Time".

Researchers expect VRO to turn up staggering numbers of objects, including up to 100 times more objects in the Solar System than have been recorded so far. If there really is a ninth planet, VRO is likely to spot it, along with new comets by the thousand. Asteroids in the zone between Jupiter and Mars will be a major interest, as well as those that may be on a collision course with Earth. While previous researchers believe they have found most of the near-Earth objects more than a kilometre across, the VRO will also pick up asteroids down to 140 metres (460ft), still big enough to cause global catastrophes.

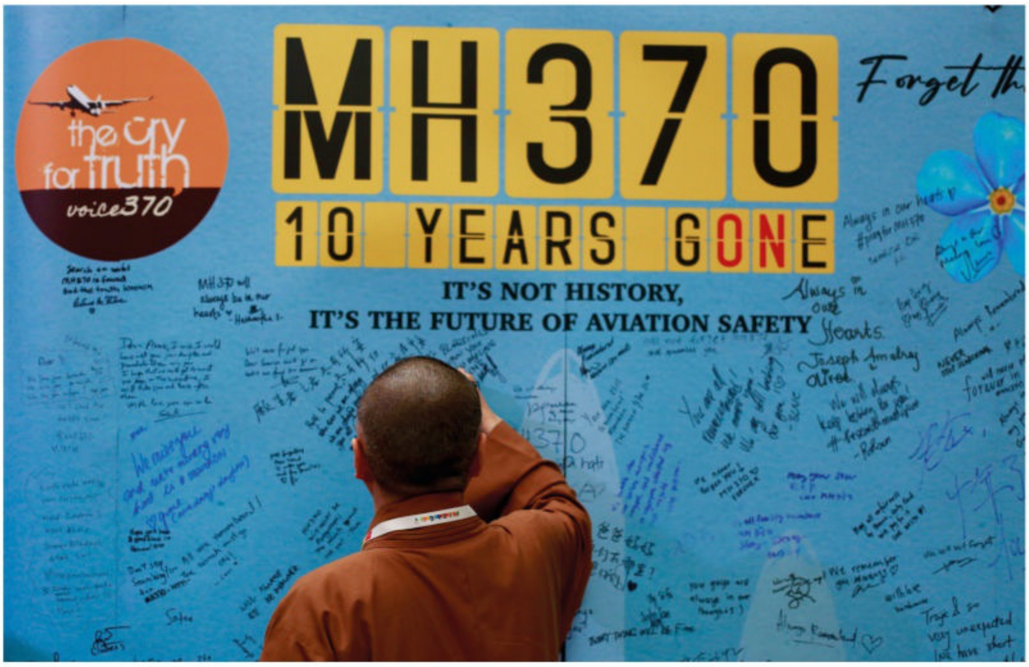
The VRO will also see plenty of objects beyond the Solar System, such as novæ and supernovæ like the one seen by Brahe. This will provide useful information on the pattern of expansion of the Universe, which in turns tells about the behaviour of dark matter and dark energy. And, because it sees everything, the VRO will also pick up rare and exotic phenomena like gamma-ray bursts, variables quasars, and interstellar objects like 'Oumuamua (see **FT404:14**).

The VRO's ability to detect changes in brightness allows it to spot subtle astronomical events, like pairs of dense neutron stars merging, black holes eating nearby gas in their galaxies, and stars being torn apart by black holes. And as the VRO website notes, "what many Rubin scientists are most excited about are the things we'll detect but can't identify. What mysteries are out there in the Universe waiting to be discovered?"

Astronomers like Brahe or Herschel had to peer through their own telescopes, painstakingly recording what they saw over many nights before publishing weeks or months afterwards. The VRO will produce a torrent of strange and mysterious objects and events, filling inboxes with images tagged with question marks. This deluge will shake up academia at a rate which would have previously been unthinkable. Expect some exciting times ahead.

MH370: STILL MISSING

As Malaysian investigators mark a decade since the flight's disappearance, a new search is proposed



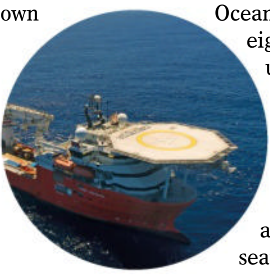
ZUMA PRESS, INC. / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Visitors write messages at a Day of Remembrance for Flight MH370 at Subang Jaya, Malaysia, on 3 March, marking 10 years since the Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777 vanished. **BELOW:** The last Ocean Infinity search, using AUVs to comb the seabed, took place in 2018, and now another – using new technology – is being discussed.

Ten years ago, on 8 March 2014, a Malaysian Airlines Boeing 777, flight number MH370, left Kuala Lumpur in Malaysia for Beijing. It had 12 crew and 227 passengers aboard, but 40 minutes into its flight the plane vanished from radar screens as its course took it out of radar range and into airspace not frequented by commercial aircraft.

What is currently known about the missing flight is that having taken off at 12.41am, the plane sent its final automated position report at 1.07am. At 1.19am, a final voice transmission was received by air traffic controllers saying, "Good night Malaysian three seven zero". No distress signal was ever sent, and the plane's course changes after that final transmission appeared to be made deliberately and were unlikely to be the result of system failure. Why they were made remains mysterious, but the "possibility of intervention by a third party cannot be excluded" according to Kok Soo Chon, chief inspector of the Malaysian investigation team. No signals from the plane locator beacons were ever received, nor was the black box data recorder's locator activated, possibly because records showed that the battery in the locator had expired more than a year before and had not been replaced.

Malaysia initially combed the South China Sea and the Straits of Malacca for the plane, but then analysis of satellite data revealed that it had turned around, flown until it ran out of fuel, then crashed into the Indian Ocean somewhere between Western Australia and Antarctica. Further analysis narrowed the potential area down to a much smaller, albeit still vast, area of ocean. This is miles deep in places and dotted with undersea volcanoes and difficult terrain. Despite intensive searches of this zone, the aircraft has never been found, although its fate is clear from fragments of debris periodically washed up on East African beaches, 20 of them to date. "We know that it's close to the seventh arc in the southern Indian Ocean," said Peter Foley, director of the Australian search effort. "We just need another search".



Now, the Malaysian government has announced it is in talks with marine robotics company Ocean Infinity about conducting a major new search, the first since 2018. Then, Ocean Infinity used eight autonomous underwater vehicles (AUVs) that could closely follow the contours of the seabed, directed from a mother ship above. This enabled searchers to cover as large an area in five months as previous searches had in three years. Any new search will take advantage of even more advanced technology, involving a new fleet of robotic ships, each with its own swarm of AUVs, operated remotely from a mission control base in Southampton. This should be able to cover a greater area still. If the aircraft is found, it is unlikely that it will be possible to raise it. It is likely to be at considerable depth and, as it would have hit the water at several hundred miles per hour, it would have been torn to pieces on impact. However, analysis of the debris field and any surviving flight recorders could provide greater clarity as to why MH370 turned round, vanished from the radar, and ultimately crashed.

OCEAN INFINITY

The leading official theory for the strange behaviour of MH370 is that there was a disastrous depressurisation of the cabin causing everyone aboard to fall swiftly unconscious through lack of oxygen, although that conflicts with the evidence that the flight changed course under conscious control. Deliberate murder-suicide by the pilot has been proposed to account for this, something his family strongly rebut, and a cockpit fire producing smoke that overcame the crew has also been suggested. Other hypotheses claim that Russian special ops stole the plane, faked the flight traces, and flew it to Kazakhstan, although why they should do so, what happened to the passengers and why debris keeps washing up in Africa has not been explained satisfactorily. The US also gets blamed, allegedly shooting MH370 down because its pilot was taking it on a 9/11 style suicide mission, then covering this up by faking the satellite data and planting the debris, and of course, there will always be those who blame aliens. *deseret.com, thedailybeast.com, 1 Mar; theguardian.com, 4 Mar 2024.*

For more on the MH370 mystery, see **FT345:12, 348:69, 352:8, 371:74-75, 407:53** and **432:52-53.**

Let's get physical

ALAN MURDIE explores celebrity reports of hands-on ghosts and touchy-feely phantoms

BENJAMIN JOHN / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: The Georgian home of novelist Jeanette Winterson (below) in London's Spitalfields came complete with a ghost that took her pulse.

Many stories of tactile ghosts are recorded across the years from séance chambers and haunted houses – entities that stroke, caress, tap, grasp, poke, pinch, punch, push, pull, scratch, slap, beat, levitate and even on occasion take intimate liberties with people. But have you ever heard of a ghost checking the pulse of a living person?

I must admit I had not, or at least until I read the remarkable account given by novelist Jeanette Winterson of the haunting of her Spitalfields home to the *Daily Mail* online last October. Situated near Spitalfields Market, her house dates from around 1780. The ground floor opened as a grocery in 1805, but the whole building lay abandoned and derelict when she bought it in the 1990s. During the rebuild, she decided to use it as a shop again as "a deli with good food".

As part of the conversion she constructed a bedroom and bathroom in the basement for use by herself whenever friends came to stay. Within the basement area was a section dubbed the 'vault', considered to predate the rest of the property by over century, as adjudged from its mid-1660s brickwork. When digging into the 'vault', the skeleton of a cat with a charm around its foot was discovered, possibly a foundation sacrifice or precaution against witchcraft.

She was awoken by "the quick, insistent sound of busy footsteps clattering down the wooden stairs"

HOUSE OF LORDS

Perhaps this should have been a warning, for one night when sleeping in the basement she was awoken by "the quick, insistent sound of busy footsteps clattering down the wooden stairs." Coming to she "....felt a hand take hold of my wrist where it hung out of the covers. The fingers were icy, precise. I realised they were taking my pulse. I said, no idea why: 'I am alive'." At that point, the hand withdrew and the footsteps went back up the stairs.

Getting up immediately and searching, she found the basement entrance was locked. It transpired her friends had slept all night peacefully upstairs. The only thing that had changed was the door to the 'vault' was slightly open.

Winterson speculated that "all our building works had disturbed something" and excavations in the 'vault' were stopped. "It felt like it should be left alone," she writes, "so we closed it up with a heavy door."

Accounts of being touched by ghostly hands or fingers are legion. For instance, on a ghost tour held at the Cecil Higgins Art Gallery, Bedford, in 2007 journalist Sue Brickay and others complained of touches from invisible fingers (*Bedfordshire on Sunday*, 21 Jan 2007); the Skirid Inn, Abergevanny, regularly turns in similar reports (see *Pontypool & Cwmbran Free Press*, 18 April 2007 and many since). Some are altogether more unpleasant, for instance a poltergeist specialising in throwing fertiliser from bins in Bromley in 1974 left the imprint of a "child's hand's small fingertips" (investigated by Manfred Cassirer; see *Journal* of the SPR vol.49 no.879, Sept 1978). But whilst in the literature of psychical research instances exist of researchers taking the pulses of materialised phantoms – e.g. Sir William Crookes with the spirit of 'Katie King' (**FT179:30-37**) recalled in *Ghosts Vivisected* (1958) by Mrs AMW Stirling and Harry Price taking the pulse of the spirit child 'Rosalie' in December 1937 (**FT384:19**) – I have never heard of the reverse! So a unique phenomenon, at least in ghostly terms.

By way of possible explanation, Jeanette Winterson mentions a 'mind's eye' picture of her ghostly visitant as "a small and swift doctor in a dark blue coat". She also draws attention to the name Spitalfields being a Cockney shortening of 'Hospital Fields', an echo from the days of the mediæval Priory of St Mary's and its medical care for the community. Or her experience might stem from the 1665 plague and the possibility of a doctor checking a plague victim – perhaps the infected bodies were left in the 'vault'.

Completing her account, she writes that once her delicatessen business opened ghostly activity in the basement ceased. However, she then moved back upstairs only to encounter two more presences. One is a woman, possibly 19th century, wearing a long grey dress and seen sitting in a chair; visitors have "heard a swish of material and described the dress". There are sensations of a third, undefined presence, but it is not unduly troubling. (*Mail Online*, 28 Oct 2023)

This notably calm reaction contrasts with responses to a tactile ghost or ghosts manifesting in the home of another creative person, singer and performer Toyah Wilcox who shared details of her domestic haunting in Pershore, Worcestershire, on the ITV show *Loose Women*. Toyah explained that she has been forced into holding exorcism ceremonies to try and suppress "a violent ghost who strangles people." (*Daily Mail*, 31 Oct 2023)

Dressed as a black cat for the Hallowe'en themed show, Toyah stated: "I've always experienced haunted properties because I've constantly lived in very old places. This house is absolutely extraordinary. It is a very active house." Some details were previously shared in February 2022 concerning her belief that there are ghosts of two sisters who manifest by way of smells, "mainly a whiff of cigarette smoke and perfume", and a physically active ghost nicknamed 'George'.

Toyah stated: "George has never bothered me, but he's attacked my hairdresser, he's attacked friends at dinner parties." George has also sworn at her make-up artist, "effing and blinding and telling him to get out… My makeup artist was like 'Who was that?'" Yet at the time they were alone in the house.

Another victim was paranormal investigator Barri Ghai, seized as he was filming an edition of *Celebrity Help! My House is Haunted*. Showing an economy of words and tendency for concentrated expression, he cried out: "F****** hell, something just grabbed my windpipe!" He later explained: "I couldn't breathe. I couldn't get a breath in. That's what scared me. I thought I was gonna die." (*Worcester News*, 23 Feb 2022).

This led Toyah into thinking: "Our ghosts do not like men… when men come into the house, something will happen."

Women have suffered too, however. Toyah's friend Rula Lenska visited, heard children screaming in the cellar and passed out. Regaining consciousness, she received impressions of being surrounded by children.

Fortunately, another ghost dubbed 'Mary' proves more amiable, with Toyah declaring – perhaps with an excess of affection "…she's beautiful, she's kind, she's lovely", though somewhat diminished by a penchant for stealing clothes (it is an old philosophical conundrum where the clothes worn by ghosts come from, but let's not explore that here).

Toyah has previously experienced spiritual encounters dating back to her teenage years. When hypnotised nearly 20 years ago she underwent past-life regression, producing memories of being a mediæval anchoress in Holland (see *Psychic News*, 11 June 2005). In the 1970s she experienced a poltergeist outbreak, featuring a disturbing voice (described in her 2000 autobiography *Living Out Loud*).

One wonders what might be unearthed if any renovations or excavations ever take place at her present home.

Both of these interesting personal accounts surfaced in the most recent seasonal wave of ghost stories that appear in the media from early October each year, peaking at Hallowe'en and then running through to mid-February. Provincial papers annually offer up their

ABOVE: Toyah Wilcox pictured with Ian Lawman from the *Celebrity Help! My House Is Haunted* team.

local tithe or quota of stories, increasingly padded out with dubious or irrelevant statistics, all mostly compiled from a sifting and recycling of existing Internet sources. Doubtless you will have seen an example if you've picked up whatever passes nowadays as your local newspaper or perused its online simulacrum: e.g. "11 places across the north and north-east with spooky links" (*Press and Journal*, 27 Oct 2023); "17 of the most haunted places in Halifax" (*Halifax Courier*, 31 Oct 2023); "Creepy dolls, possessed nightclubs and vengeful mermaids – the 20 most haunted places in North Wales" (*dailypost.co.uk*, 28 Oct 2023); "The 12 most haunted places in Cardiff to chill your bones" (*South Wales Echo*, 17 Nov 2023), and so on.

Five places were proclaimed as "Britain's most haunted city": Edinburgh (*Time Out*, 6 Oct), Bristol (*South-West News*, 24 Oct), Salford (*Proper Manchester*, 26 Oct), Ely (*Ely Standard*, 29 Oct) and Derby (*Derby Telegraph*, 31 Oct). The *Mirror* crowned York with the title of "Europe's most haunted city" where "every single night is like Hallowe'en". York phantoms have come a long way since the first ghost tour weekend half a century ago in February 1974, with innumerable visitors hearing of the celebrated Roman soldiers of the Treasurer's House and the spectral antics of Dick Turpin ever since (**FT364:18-20, 365:16-18, 433:43**).

Many features hint at fascinating claims e.g. Wrexham's 'possessed' nightclub bar stool (*Wales Online*, 17 Aug 2019), a 'cursed' changing room in Cardiff Stadium, and a haunted fishing heritage centre at Grimsby (*Grimsby Telegraph*, 29 Oct 2023). Clearly the intention of these articles is to have you nervously scanning these lists, fearing the worst for buildings you may know or frequent, but regrettably, there is relatively little derived from original first-hand reports unless a celebrity name is involved. Even then, these personal accounts are not explored in depth. An example was the widespread attention devoted to a domestic haunting mentioned by Lord Andrew Lloyd Webber in a *Daily Telegraph* interview at the start of January 2024 (see p.10 this issue)

Discussing whether any theatres were haunted, Lord Lloyd Webber said he had never seen a ghost but had witnessed some unusual activity at his former central London home in Eaton Square, prompting him to call upon a priest to help remove a poltergeist from his home. These manifestations were relatively minor in terms of energy and force expended, but irksome in that the poltergeist moved theatre scripts and placed them in neat piles in odd places (*Telegraph*, 3 Jan 2024).

THE SKIRRID INN

DAVID SUTTON

PARANORMAL INVESTGATIONS UK / YOUTUBE

TOP: The Skirrid Inn, Llanvihangel Crucorney, Monmouthshire, where people report being touched by invisible fingers. **ABOVE:** Tracy Jones made a disturbing discovery about her house in Rhyll, North Wales.

This flurry of stories during the dark months is at least calendrically correct, matching ancient beliefs spanning millennia, all holding ghostly forces are at their strongest during the autumn and winter months, a pattern recognised in classical times according to the Roman and Celtic festival cycles and then marked by the Christian church with All Saints Day and All Souls Day and folklore hailing Christmas Eve the ghostliest night of all.

One recent story illustrating how not all people adapt well to a haunting linked with an unpleasant discovery – even one made decades ago – comes from Rhyl in North Wales.

When Tracy Jones bought a house at 35 West Kinmel Street she was unaware of a disturbing event in its past. She let it to her elder brother who soon packed up and fled, claiming he was "too scared to stay" after a series of unexplained incidents. Setting about some historical research, Tracy then learnt her house was connected to an infamous discovery over 60 years earlier. In May 1960, Thomas Leslie Harvey, a taxi driver, decided to decorate the then home of his mother Sarah Jane Harvey, 65, intending it as a surprise for her when she returned from hospital where she was being treated for a stomach tumour. What he found was something far worse than the skeleton of a cat.

Prising open a cupboard door at the top of the stairs and pulling away some clothes inside, Leslie made the horrifying discovery of the shrivelled and mummified body of a woman wrapped up in a moth-eaten blanket. The shock he suffered can be imagined from the condition of the body given in *Time* magazine: "The skull was bare of hair, the eye sockets were hollow, and the skin was parched to the colour of dark leather and hard as rock." (*Time*, ‘A Mummy in the closet’, 31 Oct 1960). Such an instance makes one wonder if the famous ‘Mistletoe Bough’ legend might really stem from an actual event.

The mummified remains had lain entombed inside the locked cupboard for 20 years, desiccated by a flow of dry air from below into the loft vent. They were identified as Frances Alice Knight, a lodger last seen in alive in 1940. It seems accidental death or the possibility of a game of hide-and-seek gone wrong were swiftly excluded and Leslie Harvey’s mother was charged with murder when it was realised she had been falsely claiming the dead woman’s weekly allowance for two decades.

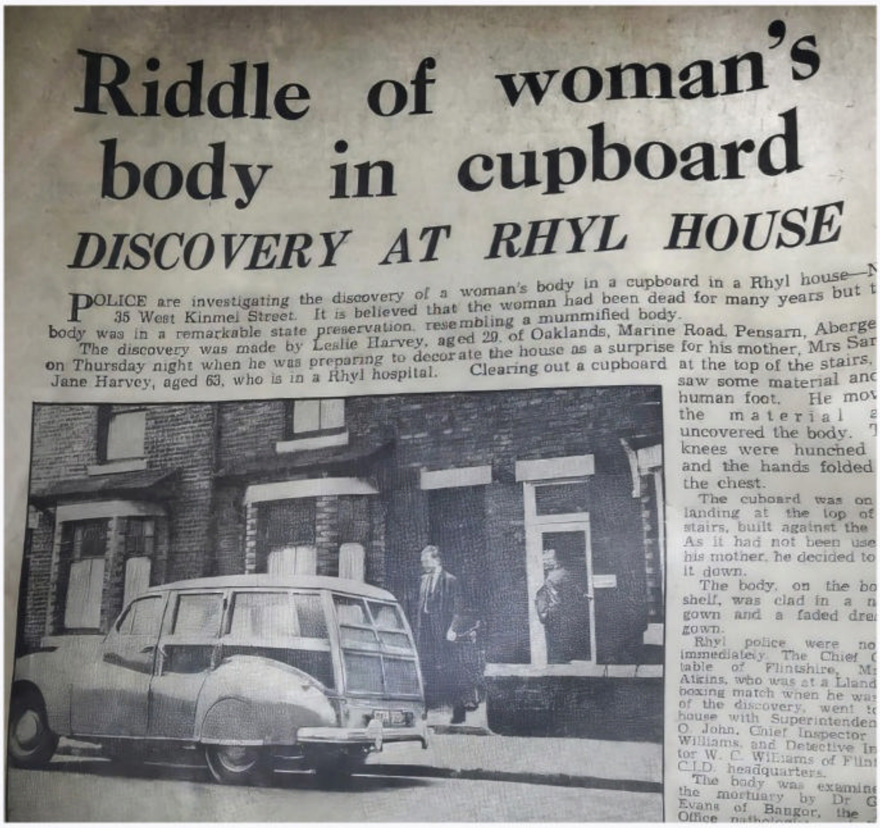
A further incriminating fact was a stocking ligature and a groove around Frances Alice Knight’s neck suggesting strangulation, but Mrs Harvey averred wrapping the neck with a stocking was a traditional cure for throat ailments. She was found not guilty of murder – a rare case of a folk belief aiding an acquittal – but convicted of obtaining money by deception and sentenced to 15 months’ imprisonment.

Tracy had known nothing of this when she purchased the property and rented it to her elder brother and his partner and then to her younger brother. She explained in a film since made by Paranormal Investigations UK how, “Standing where the cupboard would have been is a very strange, eerie feeling – cold – to think this is where someone was kept for 20 years just left to rot away...”

Her daughter Cally considers there is a ghostly female presence. Recalling how her uncle fled, she says, “My uncle actually told me that one night when he went to the toilet, he saw her and he ran back to his girlfriend and was very white in the face. I didn’t really believe the story at first, I just thought he was trying to scare me, but we have heard other noises. You sometimes hear her coming along the landing; she’s quite heavy-footed. Things go missing around the house and she sometimes likes playing with your hairdryer and electrical goods.”

Showing the bedroom her uncle formerly occupied with his partner, Cally stated: “....they said it was too spooky.” Interestingly, one incident occurred as her uncle was doing his own decorating of the bedroom with wallpaper and placed a pair of scissors on the ladder. He turned away to put up a piece of wallpaper and the scissors came floating towards him.

Reflecting the traditional view that violent deeds cause the dead to return, Tracy commented: “I always thought that if you die naturally then you automatically don’t become a ghost, but if you are murdered, I think it would come back to haunt you.”



Riddle of woman’s body in cupboard

DISCOVERY AT RHYL HOUSE

POLICE are investigating the discovery of a woman’s body in a cupboard in a Rhyl house—N
35 West Kinmel Street. It is believed that the woman had been dead for many years but t
body was in a remarkable state preservation, resembling a mummified body.
The discovery was made by Leslie Harvey, aged 29, of Oaklands, Marine Road, Pensarn, Aberge
on Thursday night when he was preparing to decorate the house as a surprise for his mother, Mrs Sar
Jane Harvey, aged 63, who is in a Rhyl hospital. Clearing out a cupboard at the top of the stairs,
saw some material anc
human foot. He mov
the material a
uncovered the body. T
knees were hunched
and the hands folded
the chest.
The cuboard was on
landing at the top of
stairs, built against the
As it had not been use
his mother, he decided to
it down.
The body, on the bo
shelf, was clad in a n
gown and a faded dre
gown.
Rhyl police were no
immediately. The Chief C
table of Flintshire, Mr
Atkins, who was at a Lland
boxing match when he was
of the discovery, went to
house with Superintenden
O. John, Chief Inspector
Williams, and Detective In
tor W. C. Williams of Flint
C.I.D. headquarters.
The body was examine
the mortuary by Dr G
Evans of Bangor, the
Office

It was the shrivelled and mummified body of a woman wrapped in a moth-eaten blanket

ABOVE: A contemporary news clipping about the ‘Rhyll mummy in the cupboard’ case. **BELOW LEFT**: Mrs Sarah Jane Harvey was charged with the murder of Frances Alice Knight, although she was eventually found not guilty.

PA IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

It will be discerned that this story carries many layers of possible meaning regarding events and their interpretation by witnesses. Are the impressions explicable by autosuggestion? People can react powerfully to notorious or spectacular crimes, even decades after their occurrence, and simply learning of such a history can play upon the mind of a sensitive or suggestible person. Could the phenomena be connected with events 64 years ago, as presumed by Tracy and Cally, a haunting arising from the presence of a long unburied body? If so, why are manifestations only surfacing now? Could self-generated stresses or fears even create psychokinetic events?

Surely this is a case well worth following up with interviews if parties are willing to talk further. Appealing for information from previous owners or occupiers might yield more evidence, either positive or negative.

Given how often *Fortean Times* carries reports of unburied bodies remaining undetected within properties, a wider survey of such ill-starred dwellings would be worth considering.

And perhaps also something to think about yourself, if you’re embarking upon some renovation and decorating work in an old property this spring...

(“Rhyl Man ‘haunted by ghost’ of woman whose mummified body was hidden in cupboard”, *Daily Star Online*, 11 Nov 2023).

The Mexican mystery cats keep coming! **KARL SHUKER** examines some more feline enigmas

VASSILL / CREATIVE COMMONS

GROUMFY69 / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE LEFT: A jaguarundi, *Herpailurus yagouaroundi*, one possible identity for the Mexican mystery cat described by 16th century Spanish naturalist Francisco Hernandez as the *tlalmiztli*. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The northern tiger cat, *Leopardus tigrinus*, one of two known species – but could there be a third?

In last month's Alien Zoo (**FT442:17**), I covered no fewer than four allegedly different types of Mexican mystery cat, two of which – the gracile *mazamiztli* or deer-puma, and the mane-bearing *leoncillo*, had not previously been documented in the cryptozoological literature.

But that is not all. I have now learnt of two more Latin American feline enigmas, one of which is cryptozoological, the other cryptic. So here they are.

THE TANTALISING TLALMIZTLI

It was longstanding Facebook friend Hodari Nundu, a renowned Mexican artist and crypto-enthusiast, who had kindly drawn my attention to two early Spanish works documenting the *mazamiztli*. Moreover, in one of those, his 1570s magnum opus *Historia Natural de la Nueva España*, dealing with the wildlife of what is today Mexico, Spanish naturalist Francisco Hernández de Toledo has now been revealed by Hodari to have also written about another, but very different, Mexican mystery cat, the *tlalmiztli*. Providing details on his Facebook page, Hodari notes that this unidentified felid was said by Hernández to be smaller than a cat but with a face like a lion, and despite its small size was very ferocious. Hernández also stated that a specimen of what he felt likely to have been this same mysterious species had been sent from Isla Margarita (in modern-day Venezuela) to the king of Spain but, tragically, it had died during the long sea voyage to Spain. Once again, it resembled a very small lion. Hodari speculated that it may have possibly been the *jaguarundi* (*Herpailurus yagouaroundi*), a lithe, low-slung wild cat slightly larger than a domestic cat, which is native to much of South America (including Venezuela) and Central America, up as far north as northern Mexico, with occasional specimens documented in the USA. To my mind, however, it looks if anything more like a miniature lioness than a lion as far as potential leonine comparisons are concerned. Another option suggested by Hodari is a *kinkajou* (*Potos flavus*), that small golden-furred Latin American procyonid related to raccoons and coatis. I am reminded of the *leoncillo*, the maned lion-like Mexican mystery cat that I documented last month, but this was not said to have been smaller than a domestic cat. So just like the latter animal and also the *mazamiztli*, the *tlalmiztli* currently remains an anomaly.

> *This unidentified felid was said to be smaller than a cat but with a face like a lion*

Hodari Nundu, posts on his personal Facebook page, 26 Jan 2024.

EXPOSING A NEW TIGER CAT

Now, from a cryptozoological Latin American cat to a hitherto cryptic one. Also known as the *oncilla*, *tigrillo*, or little spotted cat, and closely related to the larger, more familiar *ocelot* and *margay*, the tiger cat has traditionally been classed as a single species, *Leopardus tigrinus,* ranging from Central America to Brazil and Argentina. In 2013, however, genetic studies revealed that it actually constituted two distinct species, separated not only genetically (they do not interbreed) but also geographically. These have duly been named the northern tiger cat *L. tigrinus* and the southern tiger cat *L. guttulus*. Further studies, moreover, led by the Universidade Estadual do Maranhão, have now revealed the existence of a valid third but hitherto cryptic, unrecognised species of tiger cat. Encompassing two of the northern tiger cat's three previously-recognised subspecies, it has been dubbed the clouded tiger cat *L. pardinoides*. As a result, the other two species have needed name changes, with *L. tigrinus* now being known as the savannah tiger cat and L. *guttulus* as the Atlantic forest tiger cat, emphasising their specific habitats. The clouded tiger cat is confined to the vanishing cloud forests of the southern Central American and Andean ranges at altitudes typically above 1,500m (4,920ft) above sea level, and is morphologically distinguished by its remarkably margay-like head and its handsomely patterned coat's medium-to-large-sized rosettes that are cloud-like in appearance and often coalesce. It is the only tiger cat species to occur in Central America. Tragically, all three tiger cat species are apparently endangered, due to habitat destruction, but the newly revealed taxonomic status of the clouded tiger cat should assist in enabling conservation measures to be instigated.

www.nature.com/articles/s41598-024-52379-8, 29 Jan; www.sci.news/biology/leopardus-pardinoides-12649.html, 31 Jan 2024.

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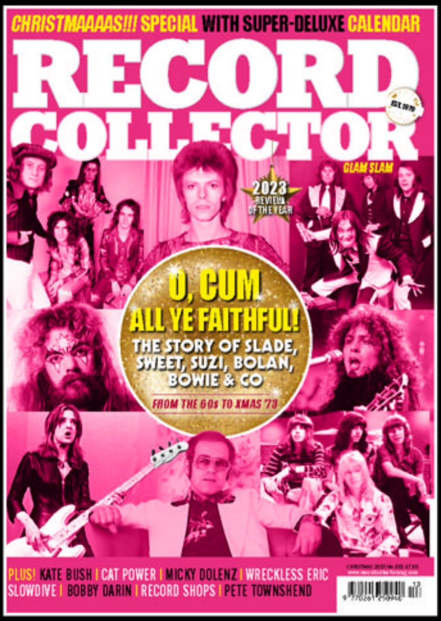
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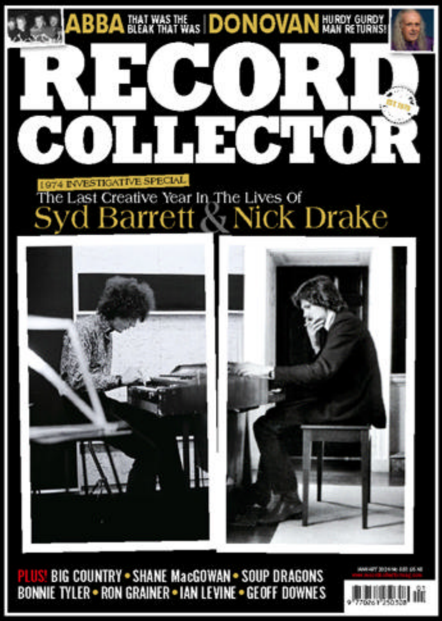
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FORTEAN FOLLOW-UPS

All the latest updates on dodgy old dogs, chain-smoking runners and fentanyl overdose scares

WORLD’S OLDEST DOG [FT429:13, 430:25, 439:23]

When he died last October at the apparent age of 31, Bobi the Rafeiro do Alentejo mastiff held the record for not only the world’s oldest living dog, but also the record for the oldest dog ever. His owners, the Costa family from the village of Conqueiros in Portugal, attributed Bobi’s longevity to a “calm, peaceful environment”, but post-mortem scrutiny of Bobi’s life suggested that all was not as it seemeds. Suspicions about the veracity of Bobi’s age claim caused Guinness World Records (GWR) to suspend his records while further investigation was carried out.

Among the factors causing doubt is a photo taken in 1999 and claimed by his owners to be of Bobi that shows a dog with different coloured paws to the one that died last year. In addition, his claim to longevity rested on his entry in the Portuguese national pet database, which was cited as confirmation of his age. However, since his death, vets have pointed out that the entries are based on owners’ self-certification of an animal’s age, so cannot be relied on to give independent verification of Bobi’s longevity. The Portuguese government database for the registration of cats and dogs has confirmed that it had an entry for Bobi in which his owners say he was born in 1992, but said that it had “no registration or data that can confirm or deny this statement” and nothing that could verify that the entry applied to the dog that died in 2023. An official at the database said that they had never been contacted by GWR to verify the information, while Danny Chambers of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons said, “Not a single one of my veterinary colleagues believe Bobi was actually 31 years old.”

ABOVE: Bobi’s dual claims to being the oldest living dog and the oldest dog ever have been rejected. **LEFT**: Fag-puffing Chinese runner Uncler Chen, barred from the Xiamen marathon.

DNA analysis confirmed that the dog was indeed old, but could not be used to verify that his age was beyond his breed’s usual lifespan.

Guinness announced that they were carrying out a “formal review” of the oldest dog record and that the organisation was examining the evidence and consulting experts. By 22 February, GWR announced it “no longer has the evidence it needs to support Bobi’s claim as the record holder” and had stripped him of the record. Bobi’s owner Leonel Costa, 38, blamed the withdrawal of his records on “a veterinary elite with a vested interest in the dog food industry” who are in denial about the virtues of Bobi’s diet of natural food. GWR said: “We’re not yet in a position to confirm a new holder for the record, although we certainly hope that the publicity around the record title encourages pet owners from around the world to get in touch.” A chihuahua named Spike, who at 23 briefly held the oldest living dog record in December 2022 before Bobi’s owner came forward, is believed to be still alive and could reclaim his record, while the oldest dog ever record is likely revert to Bluey, a cattle dog who died in Australia at the age of 29 years and five months in 1939. *theguardian.com, 16 Jan; D.Express, 19 Jan 2024.*

UNCLE CHEN [FT431:8]

Chinese marathon runner Uncle Chen, who has been nicknamed the “Smoking Brother” and achieved international fame for his habit of chain-smoking his way through every race, was disqualified from this year’s Xiamen marathon, despite completing it in three hours and 33 minutes and coming 574th out of 1,500 runners. He fell afoul of an “initiative” implemented by the Chinese Athletics Association (CAA) that says: “Uncivilized behaviour from runners such as open defecation, smoking, or trampling on flower beds or green spaces that affect the race and the safety of other runners will result in disqualification.” It is unclear how this will affect Chen’s participation in future marathons, and reactions to his ban have been mixed. Some people have celebrated him as a “legend” while others have condemned his smoking habit as inconsiderate to other runners and potentially a form of doping. *dailymail.co.uk, 19 Jan 2024.*

SHAKAHOLA FOREST MASSACRE [FT432:5]

Kenyan pastor Paul MacKenzie was arrested in April last year after it was discovered that he had persuaded many of his acolytes to starve themselves to death in order to “meet Jesus” and to kill children who resisted. Authorities found a mass graveyard in woodlands near Shakahola belonging to his Good News International “church” and embarked on the grisly task of exhuming all the remains. Some of these appeared to show signs of organ theft, raising suspicions that MacKenzie was also engaged in an illicit trade in body parts.

Now, nearly a year on, authorities have completed the exhumation, and their final count of bodies found in the forest stands at 429. Cases relating to Good News International, which authorities have now classed as “an organised criminal group”, have also started to come to court. Bizarrely, the first case to be heard involved 65 of MacKenzie’s surviving acolytes, rescued from the church’s compound by police. They were facing charges of attempted suicide after continuing to refuse food following their rescue and hospitalisation. Some were so weak that they needed to be supported by police officers to enable them to walk into the courtroom. Under legislation dating back to the colonial era, attempting suicide in Kenya is a crime and carries a potential two-year sentence. The case caused a wide outcry across the country, with the national human rights commission decrying the charges as "potentially retraumatising already seriously traumatised people".

MacKenzie himself also faced court in December, not in relation to the mass deaths of his followers, but on a charge of illegally operating the studio which he used to film his online sermons, and for distributing films without a licence. He was found guilty, although he was cleared of another charge of inciting children against attending school. Sentencing was postponed, but he faced up to five years imprisonment or a fine for this conviction. Kenyan authorities did finally get round to charging the self-proclaimed pastor with crimes relating to the mass deaths after the court warned prosecutors that if they did not get on with it, they'd release him on their own terms. As a result, he has now been charged with 191 counts of murder, assault, "facilitating the commission of a terrorist act" and "subjecting a child to torture". 94 other suspects have been charged along with him, including some of the starving acolytes authorities rescued, believed to be parents of children who died. Some of these are reported to have given false names and identities and to have failed to account for the whereabouts of their children. The trial is scheduled to begin later this year. MacKenzie maintains his innocence on the grounds that he had closed his church down before the deaths allegedly occurred. *D.Telegraph, 17 Jun 2023; BBC News, 10 Nov 2023, 16 Jan 2024; rte.ie/news, 6 Feb 2024.*

FENTANYL SCARE [431:5]

ForteanTimes
NESSIE AT 90

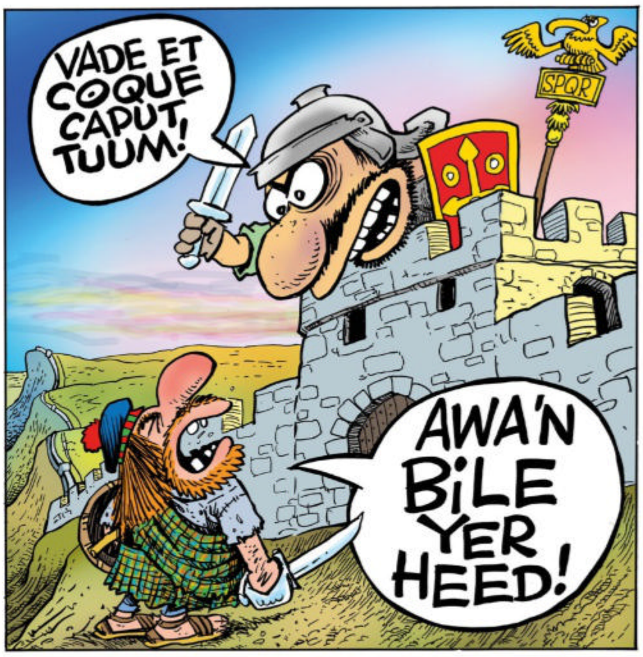
The social panic in the US about skin contact overdoses from the opiate fentanyl continues to escalate. Primarily spread among law enforcement agencies, it has seen numerous officers fainting and having panic attacks that they interpret as "overdoses" after encountering the drug. In January, the District Attorney of Sonoma County, California, Carla Rodriguez, posted a public services announcement on her website about a six-year-old child dying from a contact fentanyl overdose. It started by saying "in 2017 there was maybe 12 opioid related deaths and when the covid pandemic hit, it increased by 566%," and went on to claim that "Lisa", who loved soccer and horses, was enjoying herself in a playground when she "fell down and made this gurgling noise and then went limp". The announcement went on to say that Lisa "saw some white powder and touched it. That's all she did… All of a sudden, something just wasn't right. Her pupils look like little dots."

Local news website *The California Newsroom* doubted the tale, so they contacted Dr Ryan Marino, a medical toxicologist at Case Western Reserve University, who said: "It's impossible. Accidentally touching powder fentanyl cannot cause an overdose in any way, that's not something that's ever been reported." He also pointed out that there was absolutely no evidence that there were "just piles of fentanyl powder out in parks" and added "What a crazy amount of misinformation!" The *Newsroom* also checked with the Sonoma County Coroner's Office, who told them it had no record of a child dying from fentanyl exposure at a playground, so investigated further. They found that the announcement had been created by ad agency Amaturo Sonoma Media Group for Rodriguez, who had contributed to the content. They contacted Rodriguez to ask her questions about the alleged incident and she admitted "It is not based on a true story," but was unrepentant, saying "I am not concerned about people being too alert about the dangers of fentanyl, period. I am not." She insisted that the medical experts are wrong and that she has "seen some evidence that touching fentanyl can be hazardous", although she did not go on to provide any. "The science is very sound," Marino said. "There has never actually been a case of this." *norcalpublicmedia.org, 17 Jan 2024.*

MYTHCONCEPTIONS

by Mat Coward

278: HADRIAN'S WALL


VADE ET COQUE CAPUT TUUM!
SPQR
AWA'N BiLE YER HEED!

ILLUSTRATIONS BY HUNT EMERSON

The myth

Hadrian's Wall marks – or else used to mark – the boundary between England and Scotland.

The "truth"

Colloquially, Scotland is sometimes referred to by more southerly Britons as being anywhere "North of Hadrian's Wall" – and a surprising number of people take this literally. In fact, the wall has always been in England, as long as England has existed, and no part of it has ever been in Scotland. To the south of the wall lies England, and to the north of the wall lies more England; Northumberland, chiefly. The formal boundary between England and Wales has varied over time, but it has never touched the wall.

Sources

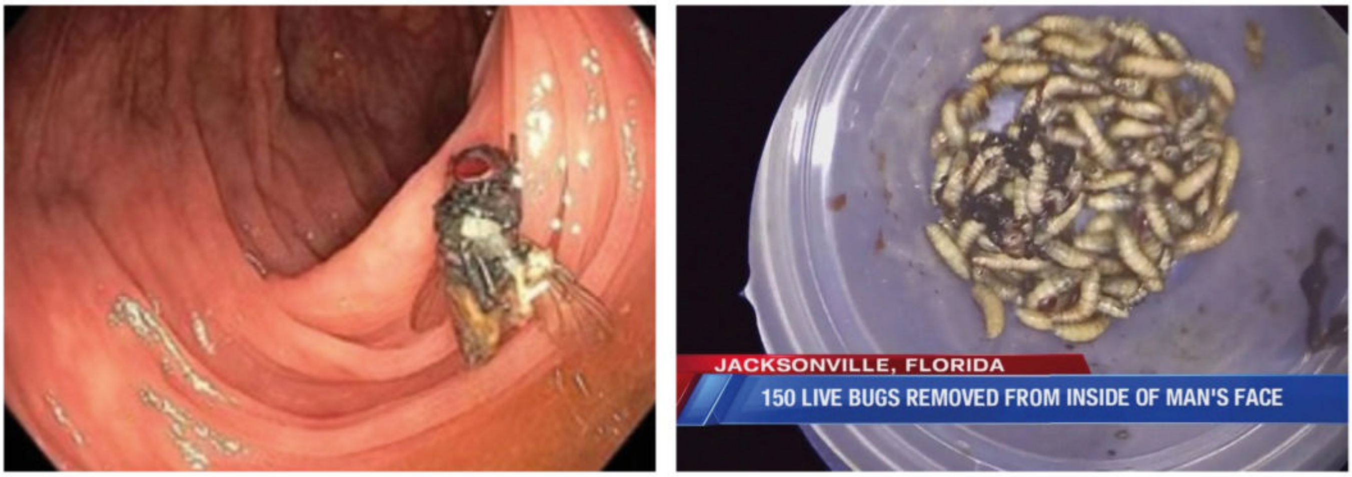
www.english-heritage.org.uk/visit/places/hadrians-wall; www.visitnorthumberland.com/explore/destinations/historical-sites/hadrians-wall; www.themaparchive.com/product/hadrians-wall-122-ce; *Emperor of Rome* by Mary Beard (Profile Books, 2023); *SPQR* by Mary Beard (Profile Books, 2015); *UnRoman Britain* by Miles Russell & Stuart Laycock (The History Press, 2010).

Mythchaser

Did Hadrian's Wall ever represent a boundary – not between England and Scotland, obviously, which hadn't yet been invented, but between Roman Britain and the barbarians? Almost every standard source says so. Construction of the 73-mile long wall, stretching from the east coast to the west, began in AD 122 early in the reign of Emperor Hadrian. He pursued a policy of consolidating and unifying the existing empire, rather than trying to expand it. Most histories describe the wall as a defensive structure, intended to protect the conquered south against raids from the unconquered north. However, at least one very significant authority disagrees. In her latest book, Mary Beard writes that "Despite appearances, even Hadrian's wall in England does not mark the edge of Roman territory and influence, which went much further north (the Wall itself was more of a boastful assertion of Rome's dominance over the landscape than a boundary marker)." Others have described the wall as primarily a customs post, or immigration checkpoint, rather than a fortified, physical barrier between civilisation and wildness, or even a line in the mud to signify an administrative boundary.

MEDICAL BAG

This month, a pair of particularly stomach-churning cases caused by errant insects, plus a potential new strain of syphilis and the dangers of stifling a sneeze



AMERICAN JOURNAL OF GASTROENTEROLOGY

ABOVE LEFT: During a routine colonoscopy, gastroenterologists at the University of Missouri discovered a fly in a patient's colon. **ABOVE RIGHT**: Meanwhile, a Florida man who felt like "his whole face was on fire" was found to have more than 150 insect larvæ in his nose and sinus cavity.

EXTREME NOSE TERROR

An unnamed Florida man turned up at the HCA Florida Memorial Hospital in Jacksonville in early February after he started feeling like "his whole face was on fire". He had been suffering minor symptoms since October, but went to hospital when they suddenly became much worse. "Over a couple hours my face just started swelling, my lips swelled, I could hardly talk," he said. "I couldn't even get up to go to the bathroom without my nose starting to bleed."

He was examined by ear, nose and throat specialist Dr David Carlson, who was shocked to find a large number of insect larvæ, some the size of the end of his little finger, feeding on the flesh in the man's nose and sinus cavity. "I knew he was in big trouble – there was erosion that was occurring near the skull base in very close proximity to his eye and his brain," Carlson said. "They were right up against his skull base, right under the brain, had they gone through that it could have killed him." He first attempted to remove the larvæ by suction, but they were too firmly embedded and had to be pulled out one by one, more than 150 in all.

> *"My face started swelling, my lips swelled, I could hardly talk"*

It is a mystery how the patient could have ended up with such a large infestation of the nasal cavities, although he is a fisherman, and it is thought possible that it could be the result of poor hygiene while handling dead fish. The larvæ have been sent off to an entomologist for identification, which should help with the diagnosis, while the patient says, "Before, I would rinse my hands in the river – now I'll use cleaner to do a better job and not touch my nose or my hand." *huffpost.co.uk, 20 Feb 2024.*

HUMAN FLY

Even more mysterious was a fly found deep inside a Missouri man's intestine during a routine colon screening. Matthew Bechtold, the chief of Gastroenterology at the University of Missouri, who carried out the screening, said that the 63-year-old patient had no idea how the fly had got there. He had only consumed clear liquids the day before the procedure and while he had eaten pizza and lettuce for dinner two days previously, he did not remember a fly being in his food. Bechtold said he had prodded the fly and confirmed it was dead and described the discovery as "a very rare colonoscopy finding and mystery on how the intact fly found its way to the transverse colon." He said it was unlikely that the fly had entered through the man's mouth, as it would have been "degraded" by upper digestive enzymes and stomach acid on the way down, but was equally unlikely to have got there via the rectum. "If from the bottom, an opening must have been created long enough for the fly to fly undetected into the colon and somehow make its way to the middle part of the colon with no light in a very curvy, large intestine," he explained.

This is not the first time an anomalous insect has been found in a human colon; there have been several instances of intact cockroaches showing up during colonoscopies, and in 2019 another colonoscopy turned up a ladybird in a patient's intestine. In this case it is believed its journey to the 59-year-old man's colon was facilitated by the gallon of polyethylene glycol laxative the patient had taken the day before to clear his gut for inspection. *iflscience.com, 2 Aug 2021; sciencealert.com, 7 Nov 2023.*

BETTER OUT THAN IN

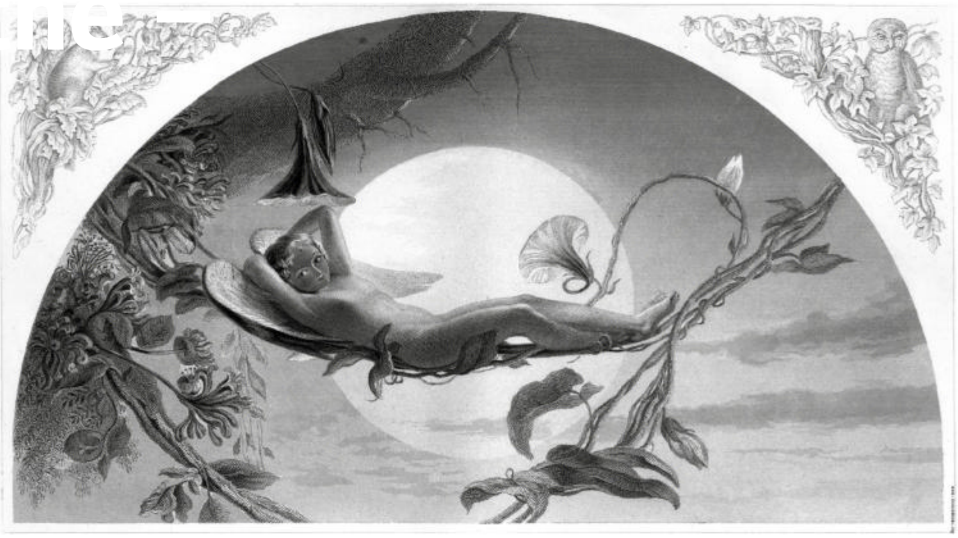
A male patient in his 30s with a history of allergies and throat irritation ended up in Ninewells Hospital, Dundee, in severe pain after he pinched his nose and closed his mouth to stifle a sneeze while driving. Doctors examining him heard a cracking sound in his neck and found he did not have full control of his neck movements, so they scanned him and discovered he had torn a 2mm hole in his windpipe. The patient did not need surgical intervention and, after being kept in overnight for observation, he was sent home with painkillers and hay fever medication and told to avoid any strenuous physical activity for two weeks.

Attempting to stifle a sneeze can be extremely dangerous as sneezing increases pressure in the upper airway 20-fold and trapping it can cause significant damage. Spontaneous tracheal perforations like this one are rare, but can be life-threatening, while in other cases people attempting to stifle sneezes have managed to rupture their eardrums, break ribs, and even give themselves aneurisms. Dr Rasads Misirovs, who treated the patient, said that people should let sneezes out, as they are the body's natural defensive mechanism to expel irritants from nasal passages. *BBC News, 14 Dec 2023.*

A SITE FOR SORE EYES

The Centres for Disease Control (CDC) in the US issued a warning about a potential new strain of the syphilis bacterium, *Treponema pallidum*, after finding an anomalous cluster of cases in an unnamed location. This involved five women aged 40 to 60, who sought medical treatment between March and May 2022. They all had similar symptoms including headaches, blurred vision, eye floaters, and photophobia (eye discomfort in bright light), and were diagnosed with ocular syphilis (syphilis of the eye). This is a rare variant of the infection and is usually found in people with late-stage syphilis, intravenous drug users, people over 65, or those who are HIV-positive. None of these women, though, fell into any of these categories; they did, however, all report having the same man as a sexual partner, making it the first reported ocular syphilis cluster linked to heterosexual transmission.

When the man was eventually tracked down and tested, he was found to have early latent syphilis – a stage where the disease is still present, but there are no symptoms. This meant medics were unable to identify any new strain of *T. pallidum* from him because there were no ulcers or lesions to swab – these are needed to produce enough material for the genetic testing required. However, the CDC has still issued an alert that a new bacterial strain, which makes it easier for the disease to move to the eye and other areas of the body, may have appeared. *sciencealert.com, 27 Nov 2023.*



FAIRIES, FOLKLORE AND FORTEANA

SIMON YOUNG FILES A NEW REPORT FROM THE INTERFACE OF STRANGE PHENOMENA AND FOLK BELIEF

HOUSE/MOUSE FAIRIES

Here's a story that almost defies belief. Seventy-five-year-old Rodney Holbrook, from Builth Wells, in Powys, Wales, noticed that someone was tidying up his work bench at night, "picking up items such as nuts and bolts, clothes pegs and cable ties and tidying them away into a box" (see **FT442:7**). Rodney put up a night-vision camera and waited. To his amazement, the film (now widely available online) revealed a mouse. FT stalwart and general scallywag Rob Gandy, who introduced me to the video, wonders whether activity of this sort might not explain some of our stories about house-fairies.

THE CONFUSION OF MOUSE EXPERTS IS ONE OF THE MOST SATISFYING ELEMENTS OF THE STORY

House fairies, it will be remembered, not only tidy up, but are also known for doing basic manual labour, leaving coins in shoes, sitting up late in front of the fire, being swart and furred, eating food left out for them, and for playing tricks on family members. A number of writers have pointed out that some of these house fairy characteristics possibly correspond to the activities of pets or rodents. You leave a bowl of milk for the house fairy and it is gone in the morning? Maybe it is just the rats. Your younger son saw a hairy form by the fire while scrambling to the jakes at midnight? Oh please, it was puss warming himself on the flags.

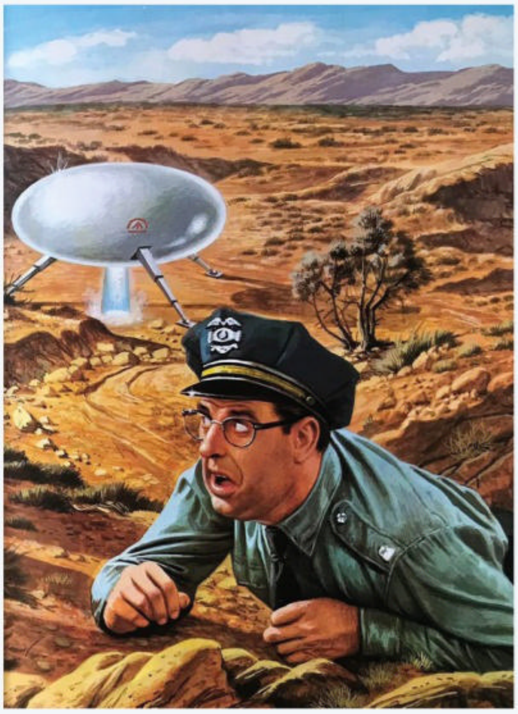
This brings us back to Rodney's tiny assistant. I have no idea what pushes Builth Wells's most famous mouse to act as he did (night after night after night). I suspect it is not common behaviour: the embarrassed confusion of mouse experts is one of the most satisfying parts of the story. But perhaps some of our earlier accounts of house fairies tidying up came down not to a sweeping brownie, but to mice or rats finding and disposing of nesting material? Even mouse-lovers, though, must accept that in no way are our tiny four-legged helpers responsible for scything the wheat or for weaving a day's worth of yarn!

On the subject of mouse activity being confused with supernatural behaviour, I've collected over the years a number of instances of singing mice. Typically, a householder hears a fantastical high-pitch siren noise that he or she cannot explain. Then, finally, at midnight in the kitchen, they glimpse the little songster performing. Here is one of many instances: "I believe in singing mice… I slept for a week once in a room… and there were a whole colony of singing mice in it. I never was so puzzled at anything in my life." Such performances could easily be understood supernaturally by residents, particularly if they heard the extraordinary murine music between snatches of sleep. Could more tales of fairy magic come from unfamiliar animal behaviour?

Simon Young is editor of *The Wollaton Gnomes: A Nottingham Fairy Mystery*

Solving the Socorro mystery?

NIGEL WATSON rounds up the latest news and views from the world of ufology



A FLASHY FRAUD?

One of the most famous UFO contact cases, much like the Valensole incident noted in my last column, was reported by Police Sergeant Lonnie Zamora. On the afternoon of 24 April 1964, he saw a craft and its occupants in a desolate area south of Socorro, New Mexico, when chasing a speeding motorist. A loud roaring noise and a flame in the sky made Zamora think a nearby dynamite shack had exploded, so he immediately abandoned the car chase to investigate the matter.

Zamora saw an egg-shaped object on the ground, and two small humanoid beings clothed in white coveralls standing next to it. After a few seconds the object ascended to a height of about 10ft (3m) and drifted away on a horizontal flightpath.

When Dr J Allen Hynek visited the location and spoke to Zamora he was convinced it was a "real encounter". Army Captain Richard Holder, based at the nearby White Sands Missile Range, also believed Zamora was genuine and not a hoaxer, but was of the opinion that a classified experimental craft had been responsible.

The possibility that Zamora saw a prototype of a Lunar Landing Module was investigated by Blue Book's Major Hector Quintanilla, but none were operational at that time. This does not rule-out any other type of vertical take-off and landing (VTOL) craft being secretly tested in the area, as Holder suggested, although there is no evidence to support this explanation.

The flight testing of an unmanned Lunar Surveyor craft suspended from a small Bell helicopter was scheduled for the morning of 24 April 1964 at White Sands. The timing of this could have been delayed until the afternoon, and as David E Thomas notes in his article "A Different Angle on the Socorro UFO of 1964", the helicopter matched Zamora's description and it was crewed by two people in white coveralls, whilst the Surveyor craft had landing legs that could have left the imprints found at the landing site.

Larry Robinson of Indiana University put forward the idea that Zamora saw a hot-air balloon, and that the red insignia he saw on the side of the craft was that of the International Paper Corporation. In an article of that period, Robinson read that the IPC had carried out a series of balloon flights, and that on one occasion they encountered a lawman who hid behind his patrol car. They quickly flew away and later found that the lawman had seen a spaceship. The main problem with this is that the article he read has not been uncovered.

A balloon craft associated with pyrotechnics is the explanation put forward by Anthony Bragalia, who notes that at that time the New Mexico Institute of Technology President Dr Stirling Colgate admitted it was a prank orchestrated by engineering students at the college. As evidence of pyrotechnics being used, charred cardboard tubing was found at the site, as well as a charred bush, and the sounds heard by Zomora could have been caused by their ignition.

It is also worth pointing out that when Zamora first saw the white seamless, egg-shaped craft it was in a vertical orientation and later it was in a horizontal orientation: could this have been due to a balloon envelope changing shape? The roaring sounds and flames he saw could have been caused by the burner positioned beneath the balloon envelope. Even more telling is that Zamora on the radio to his HQ said: "It looks like a balloon."

Bragalia adds that the original investigators never considered college students as the perpetrators even though they had a long-standing history of complex hoaxing. If it *was* the work of pranksters, we should admire their skill at staging this event; as Bragalia states, it was "a flashy fraud that continues to bedazzle us all."

This seemed like a very plausible explanation, but in the comments section of Robert Sheaffer's "Bad UFOs" blog there is some dispute over who the pranksters were and how they successfully staged the hoax.

Despite Hynek and Holder's elimination of it being a hoax perpetrated by Zamora, the whole story does sound like something out of a science fiction film; there is the interrupted car chase, the danger of the dynamite shack exploding, the mysterious red insignia, the landing traces and the enigmatic humanoids. It all sounds like the stuff of fiction, and it placed Zamora heroically at the centre of the action. *www.nmsr.org/socorro.htm; midimagic.sgc-hosting.com/howisoco.htm; www.ufoexplorations.com/socorro-ufo-hoax-3-physical-evidenc; badufos.blogspot.com/2012/08/a-socorro-student-hoax-confirmed.html#comment-form*

WILCOX'S MARTIANS

On the very same day, at 10am, about 8 hours before Zamora's encounter, farmer Gary T Wilcox in Newark Valley, New York, USA, also came across a white egg-shaped craft. Two short humanoids wearing white one-piece metallic suits came out of the craft and said they were from Mars and were very interested in soil and organic substances. Was Wilcox inspired by news of the Socorro case, or were the Martians particularly busy that day?

A HOAX IS COINED

In November 2023 the Royal Canadian Mint released a coin celebrating the famous "Duncan" UFO sighting by a nurse on the night of New Year's Day 1970. She described seeing an illuminated, silver, bowl-shaped craft with two humanoids inside it flying over Cowichan District Hospital, Duncan, Vancouver Island. She saw the occupants at the controls of an instrument panel and the sighting caused her to feel strangely withdrawn and preoccupied.

With the coin's release, 82-year-old Dan Hughes has now confessed that he and some friends built this UFO out of a dry-cleaning bag with some candles suspended underneath it. He thinks that images on the dry-cleaning bag caused the nurse to see the "aliens" inside the craft. Basically, it was a simple party trick that got out of hand and Hughes felt it was time to come clean about it. Then again… (Thanks to FT reader Doug Harlow for bringing this to my attention.) *vancouversun.com/news/local-news/duncan-ufo-sighting-depicted-on-new-coin-was-a-party-trick*

The call of the UFO

JENNY RANDLES recalls a fascinating BUFORA initiative from the 1980s – a UFO telephone 'hotline'

Many years ago when I was running the investigations department at BUFORA – the largest UFO group in the UK – I was presented with a new challenge – UFO Call. This was a telephone 'hotline' for UFO reports, and it started exactly 35 years ago as I am writing this piece – 10 February 1989. Taking the UFO mystery to the nation via their telephones offered the potential to greatly increase the number of cases that might be reported to BUFORA.

From phone calls to that hotline, we had a brief snapshot of a case, which would lead to an investigation by a local ufologist if the witness was willing. But UFO Call was a service too, reporting on interesting cases and giving the results of our investigations. By good fortune I still have all 570 of my scripts for UFO Call which, amazingly, survived into the 21st century, ending only when such phone lines were superseded by the rise of the Internet.

These messages are a fascinating look back at the changing UFO climate in the 1980s, 1990s and early 21st century. I did once consider writing a book based on them chronologically, although these days that seems unlikely to happen. But you never know.

The first case that featured on UFO Call was from 13 March 1989. Strange colours in the sky over Derbyshire and Staffordshire were reported by many witnesses as green and purple lights. As Jodrell Bank had quickly confirmed to me, it was a spectacular auroral display, then rarely seen that far south. Which led into a surprisingly topical point: I wrote that global warming was changing our atmosphere, and damage to the ozone layer was potentially making these displays more common further from the polar regions than previously.

It is amazing to see how little has changed in ufology 35 years on. But these scripts also reveal something the media failed to grasp in 1989, and still do not. That is, the job of a UFO group such as BUFORA is to *solve* cases, and that is what happens in over 90% of all reported events. It's not – as too widely misunderstood even today – finding little green men everywhere. Solving cases is success.

UFO Call No 2 covered a sighting in Scotland. This was reported by witnesses as a 'plane exploding', which turned out to be a meteor breaking up in the atmosphere. There was also a discussion of a photograph of a UFO taken through a window. This was one of the first to be sent off for computer enhancement in the USA. The analysis suggested the object was *on* the window and quite small, not outside and much larger. How that impacts the case is up to you! But UFO Call scored 0 out of 3 in terms of finding real cases with obvious aliens involved to talk about. But our job was to find and report the truth – not what anyone simply preferred to be the truth.

LEFT: Jenny Randles in the 1980s on the set of TV soap opera *Brookside* recording testimony from actress Doreen Sloane that would eventually feature on UFO Call.

A UFO researcher has to juggle with the likely in one hand and the improbable in the other

Happily though, things livened up somewhat by the third episode, recorded on 31 March 1989. We then had a real-life space mystery. Indeed, I recall being sent to TV studios to discuss this, so intriguing was it; I think one appearance was on the then new *This Morning* on ITV, which was in those days live from an old dock in Liverpool. The media were very excited – the *Daily Star* put it on their front page, with the headline "SHUTTLE CREW SAW ALIENS". The story was that Col John Blaha – the shuttle pilot, on his first flight – had allegedly had a conversation with NASA ground control, saying "Houston – This is Discovery. We still have the alien spacecraft under observation." The words are real: you can still access them online.

Of course, NASA flat out deny there was any sighting of a UFO during this mission, which was sent up to deploy a satellite. It seemed possible someone set out to confuse, or perhaps just joke, knowing full well the nature of the 'alien' spacecraft to which they referred. It was most likely the Russian Mir space station – on board which, in fact, Blaha later served – with 'alien' being used here in its sense of 'not ours'. We are so used to thinking of the term 'alien' as meaning 'extraterrestrial' that we forget it comes from Latin and basically just means 'foreigner'.

Most of the cases discussed on UFO Call are long forgotten now, but the variety reveals how a UFO researcher has to juggle with the likely in one hand and the improbable in the other, while finding a way to balance them and decide what is most plausible. Anyone doing this objectively quickly realises that the job of a UFO researcher is more mundane than you might expect most of the time, but contains the tantalising possibility that every now and then a case will emerge that defies explanation – for then at least. Because never say never is the one true way to do research.

Indeed, in episode 4 of UFO Call we had a case that ended up getting its own article in *Fortean Times* years later, and it created quite a debate as to its explanation. This was a true rarity – a photograph not of a UFO but of an alleged alien. It was taken on Ilkley Moor on 1 December 1987 and was to take centre stage in a presentation by my long-term co-author Peter Hough, in nearby Bradford Central Library. He was hoping to dissect what we then knew about this gloriously implausible claim, which took many years to fully investigate. A little green man on the moors being about as archetypical as you can get. Happily, you can follow the debate on that in your back issues of this very magazine (see **FT230:30-32** and p.64 this issue).

This is just touching on less than one per cent of UFO Call. It's like going back in time and watching ufology unfold if you were there in its heyday. Perhaps, for history's sake, I should write that book after all!

On every message I signed off with "Don't forget make it a regular date to call BUFORA's UFO Call. My name is Jenny Randles – keep those eyes on the skies." Words as true today as then. But I might add today – also keep your feet on the ground.

THE LEVITATIONS OF ST JOSEPH OF COPERTINO EXPLAINED?

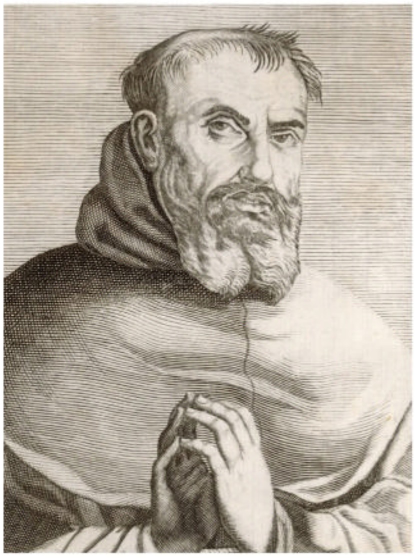
The 17th century Saint Joseph of Copertino was said to have performed astonishing feats of levitation on a regular basis, often attested by multiple witnesses. How can these aerial antics be accounted for? Joe Nickell, the chief investigator of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, thinks he has the answer, but **BOB RICKARD** questions Nickell's disingenuous strategy and reductive explanations.

The idea of human levitation is, by its very nature, subversive and surreal. The phenomenon – if we temporarily accept such a thing in order to examine it – involves events that imply that our understanding of physical 'reality' is incomplete. At the same time, the idea of levitation as a symbol of transcendence is both profound and ancient. Narrative accounts of it are reported from most cultures and ages.

Despite this persistence, there has been little scholarly discourse about reports of the human body rising into the air.[1] In most societies this feat is the prerogative of a shaman, or holy mystic; a token of divine favour; and imitated by magicians and occult adepts. In the context of anthropology, it becomes an element of a shamanic symbolic journey. In the context of modern scientific discourse, though, it is aggressively dismissed as an embarrassing error by the ill-informed and the credulous.

I recognise why sceptics and scientists regard this subject as contentious, apart from its inherent challenge to orthodox physics. It is, like so many seductive and interesting phenomena, exceedingly rare in both incidents and observations. It is also characteristically spontaneous; therefore, eyewitness reports of it deserve to be treated with appropriate care. In St Joseph of Copertino's remarkable case, his levitations were repeated so frequently for nearly three decades that they provided many opportunities for good observation and documentation.

JOSEPH'S LEVITATIONS WERE REPEATED FREQUENTLY FOR NEARLY THREE DECADES



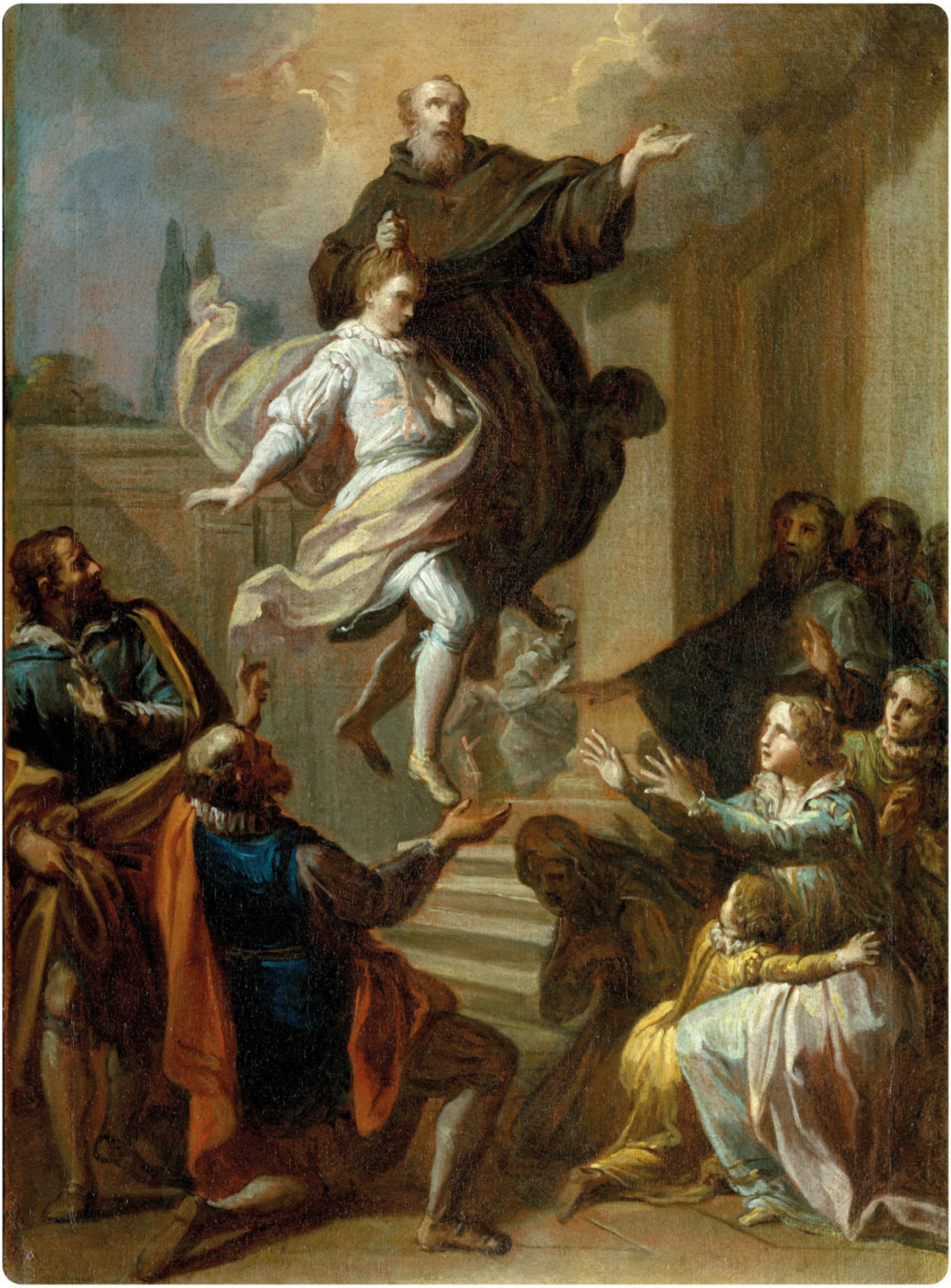
LEFT: There are no known contemporary portraits of Joseph. The many extant guesses are probably based upon his 'death mask'. **FACING PAGE:** This altarpiece by Placido Costanzi (1702-1759), was painted in 1750 for the Colonna family and commemorates one of the most famous of Joseph's Assisi levitations: "A lunatic had been brought to the monastery for Joseph to cure him. This lunatic was a noble citizen of Assisi named Balthasar Rossi. He was led to the saint bound to a chair, for he was dangerous and used to assault people, saying they were mad. Joseph ordered the man to be set free, made him kneel down in the oratory, and, laying his hand on his head. Said: "Do not fear, Chevalier Balthasar; commend yourself to God and his Holy Mother." With these words, he clutched the lunatic by the hair, uttered his usual cry, and was raised off the floor with Balthasar, whom he held for a time in mid-air to the amazement of the bystanders. Then, after a quarter of an hour, he sank to earth again and dismissed the nobleman with these words, "Now, cheer up, Chevalier!". Bernini, *Vita, 1722*.

CHRONICLE / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

This critique is a response to two short articles written by Joe Nickell, a Senior Research Fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI) [2] who dismisses the voluminous and complex subject of human levitation – and the evidence for St Joseph's elevations in particular [3] – in a manner that falls below the standard that he (and the CSI) demand of others. It is not my intention, here, to make a case for the reality of levitation. Instead, I argue that Nickell's attempts to explain away Joseph's phenomena waste a prime opportunity for a serious discussion. It is important to challenge his so-called 'explanations' because there is a distinct possibility – due to the impressive outreach of CSI propaganda – that Nickell's errors and misconceptions will enter public consciousness as 'received wisdom' and become lauded examples of how to dismiss subjects that merit CSI's disapproval.

A LIFE IN THE AIR

The historical documentation of the levitations of the 17th century Catholic Saint, Giuseppe Desa of Copertino (1603-1663) – to whom I will refer as Joseph – is of a quality that deserves a much fairer discussion than



METROPOLITAN MUSEUM, NEW YORK

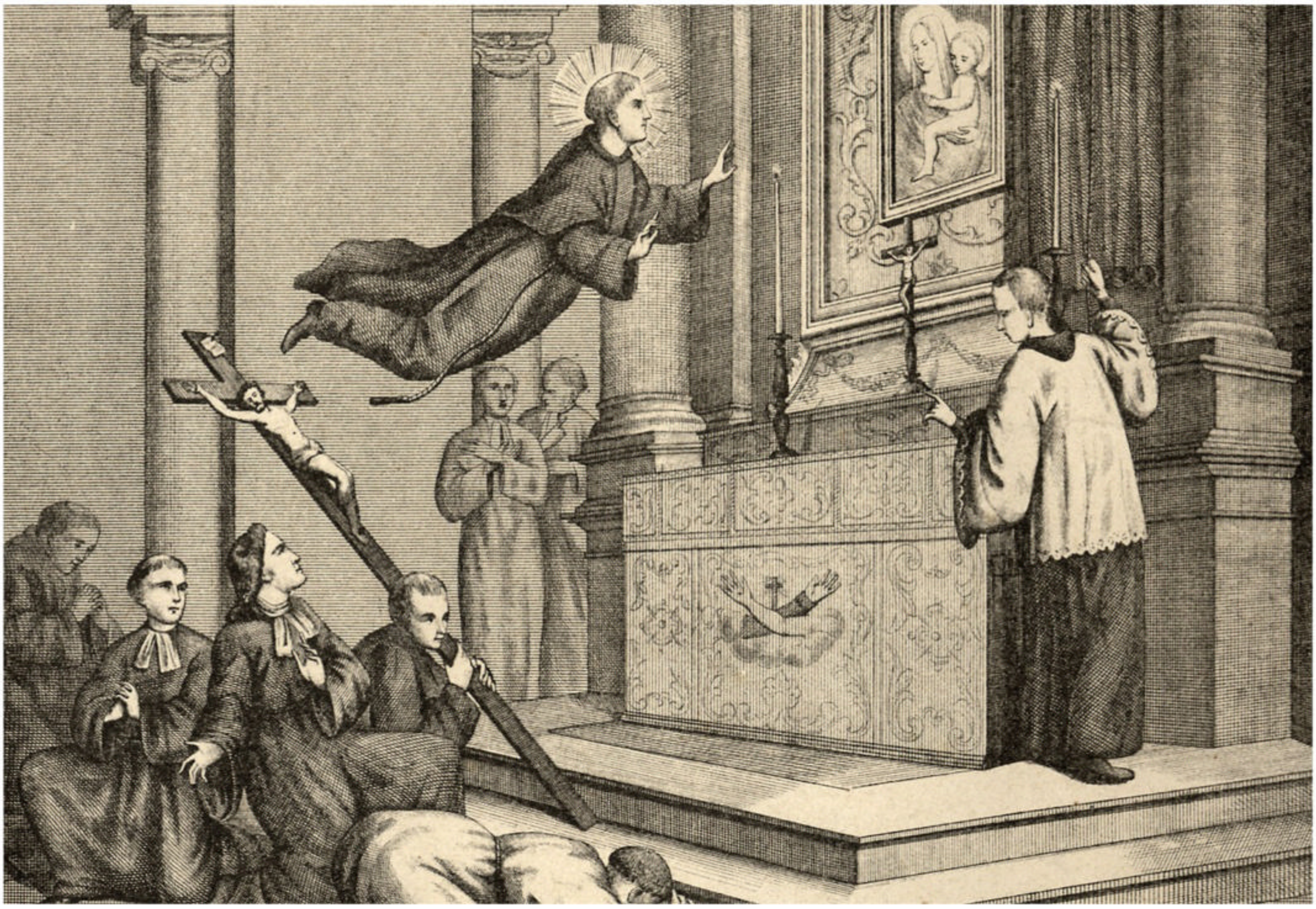


PHOTO12 / UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES

ABOVE: One of the more sober depictions of Joseph's 'flights'. Of the 70 levitations at Assisi, as recorded by Abbot Rosmi, at least 15 involved Joseph 'flying' towards or kneeling in mid-air before a statue, or icon, of the Virgin Mary. Sometimes this was over the heads of rows of the congregation. **OPPOSITE:** "Saint Joseph of Cupertino in Ecstasy", an 18th century painting by Giambettino Cignaroli.

that offered by Nickell.

I agree with Nickell and the CSI in their call for a good standard of evidence for claims about an anomalous phenomenon (such as human levitation), but they lose the plot in demanding that only "extraordinary" evidence is permitted. [4] Writing in 1951, the Jesuit scholar Father Herbert Thurston proposed that levitation "is a matter peculiarly suitable for investigation" because "the fact, if it be a fact, *requires no expert evidence to attest it*" [my emphasis]. He explains:

"Given sufficient day-light and fairly normal conditions the most uneducated witness is competent to declare whether a particular person was standing upon the ground or elevated in the air, the more so because, owing to the state of trance in which the subject of the inquiry is found, it is quite possible for the witness to approach and satisfy himself by the sense of touch that the spectacle presented to his eyes is no illusion." [5]

In short, I would argue, with Thurston, that there are no 'degrees' of proof. Evidence either proves something or it isn't evidence.

In both articles, Nickell makes his scepticism – or 'skepticism' [6] – clear, as is his right; but declaring, for example, that Joseph's altered states of consciousness are "feigned entrancements" or describing the young Joseph's visits to his local church as "loitering" is character assassination not scholarship.

ACCOUNTS WERE RECORDED DURING JOSEPH'S LIFETIME BY PEOPLE WHO KNEW HIM

In fact, Nickell employs the same rhetorical strategy that CSI publicly deplores in its campaign against the proponents of 'pseudoscience'. Sometimes called the 'straw man' technique, [7] it cleverly adapts or omits parts of the testimony to set up a false argument, making it all the easier to demolish later. In Nickell's case, this means 'proving' that his own ready-made hypotheses were correct. [8]

Before I show why Nickell's short shrift is simply wrong, I will provide an overview of the key documentary sources and some biographical information on Joseph.

BEHOLD THE MAN

Joseph's phenomena, as reported in the narratives about him, have two main interrelated components: he is usually experiencing an unusual state of consciousness, and yet, by some indeterminate process, the elevation is observed to be enacted bodily.

There have been four major studies of historical levitation narratives – by Josef Görres (1776-1848), Albert de Rochas (1837-1914), Herbert Thurston (1856-1939) and Olivier Leroy (1884-1976) [9] – with all agreeing that Joseph is the single most impressive example of a Christian levitator; a man, of whom it was said, "he spent half his life in ecstasy in the air". [10]

When we examine the witness depositions, we must also remember that, in most cases, the lives of the saints were compiled long after they had died and so often included elements of legend building (what the Bollandists call 'hagiographic exaggeration'[11]). In his earliest discussion of levitations, Thurston forewarns us of the kind of stories in which …

"… the marvellous event, deposed to by a single witness in extreme old age who had heard the story in his youth from some third person unnamed, is set down as a fact with the same trustful confidence with which the biographer records the details attested independently by a dozen different contemporaries who had lived in daily intercourse with the Saint and had been the spectators of all his actions." [12]

In Joseph's case, however, the key sources easily fulfil Thurston's second prescription because the significant eyewitness accounts were recorded during Joseph's lifetime by people who knew him well.

Joseph's spontaneous ecstasies began in March 1628, "immediately after his ordination" as a priest at the age of 25[13] and increased in frequency until his death in 1663; a period of 35 years. The levitations invariably proceeded from an ecstatic state of consciousness, described in the accounts as a *rapture*. Joseph's close friend and diarist, Don Arcangelo Rosmi (d.1654) recorded around 70 of these elevations by Joseph during the 14 years (1639-1653) that he stayed with Joseph at the Franciscan sanctuary in Assisi.

However, Abbot Rosmi qualifies this with an extraordinary statement: he felt that it was superfluous to record any more of Joseph's elevations because they had become so frequent and so familiar. He reasoned that "if [70] is not proof enough another 300 would be meaningless".[14] Most of these would have been in the privacy of his tiny cell where, according to Joseph's early biographer Domenico Bernini: "Every time [Joseph] would say his devotions he would go up."

By the time Joseph died, Rosmi's 70 examples were surpassed greatly. The modern Franciscan scholar Gustavo Parisciani – who has studied the witness depositions in the Vatican archive for Joseph's time in Assisi – noted that they included at least 150 eyewitness accounts. This is just a fraction of Joseph's almost daily manifestations over 35 years, many of which – as the pictorial references remind us – were outside, in the open, and amid many people.

Joseph's raptures were at their most intense when he conducted a Mass, and towards the end of his life elevations could occur several times a day. Joseph's æsthetic sensitivity was heightened to the extent that his raptures could be triggered whenever something beautiful or sacred came to his attention. A pious phrase, inspiring music, a flower, or young animal, for example, could thrust him immediately into an intense ecstasy. The levitations themselves would begin with a great, eerie cry – described as more of a scream than a shout. Sometimes he would rise into the air smoothly and on other occasions it seemed as though he was propelled from a position of standing or kneeling. The combined sight and sound often shocked witnesses, who would describe their profound reactions in that moment.[15]

Those Catholics who made good observations were encouraged to make their depositions under solemn oath.[16] These oaths are significant because they were usually administered by a Superior or Confessor under solemn caution of peril to their eternal souls. While it is easy for a sceptic like Nickell to scorn the value of such a caution, there could hardly be a more serious vow for Catholics of that time. It was common, too, for such evidence to be sealed until after the death of both the witness and the levitant. Therefore, this evidence, Thurston argued, was "often more remarkable, and notably better attested, than any to be found in the *Proceedings* of the Society for Psychical Research."

THE KEY BIOGRAPHICAL SOURCES

Of Joseph's few biographers, the earliest, was Fr Roberto Nuti whose *Vita di Ven Giuseppe da Copertino* (1678) included many immediate eyewitness accounts. A new edition by the Historical Society of Lecce in 2013 – titled *Fra Giuseppe Desa da Copertino, Processo Assisano di Beaificazione (1666)* – also contains Arcangelo Rosmi's invaluable diary.

The most important biography is by Domenico Bernini (son of the famous sculptor). Although his *Vita* was not published until 1722 – 59 years after Joseph's death – Bernini had collected testimony recorded during Joseph's lifetime from 1628 onwards, as well as documentation in support of Joseph's beatification. Bernini had taken a personal interest in Joseph ever since, in his youth, he had been taken to see Joseph in his cell, where he witnessed him in an ecstatic trance that lasted half an hour.[17]

The key historical archive – now in the Vatican library[18] – are the 13 volumes of Bernini's *Vita*; the legal briefs (*processi*) and minutes of the official Inquisitions for Joseph's beatification and canonisation; as well as collected letters, diaries, and memoirs by those who knew him in life. The closest we can get to these primary narratives is in the studies by Fr Parisciani and his colleagues published (in Italian) and compiled by the Historical Society of Lecce.[19]

To these, I must add three comprehensive commentaries on Joseph and his phenomena that I have found helpful. The first is an invaluable bibliography on Joseph by the anthropologist and historian of the occult Dr Eric Dingwall (1890-1986; see **FT299:44-49, 300:50-54**).[20] Next, the Swiss-born French novelist Blaise Cendrars (1887-1961) kept a literary diary during WWII of his own extensive research into Joseph's levitations.[21] More recentlyt, we have had Michael Grosso's two-part analysis of Joseph's life, *The Man Who Could Fly* (2016). Grosso based that study upon his commission of the first full translation into English of Bernini's *Vita*, which Grosso published (privately) the following year, *The Wings of Ecstasy* (2017).

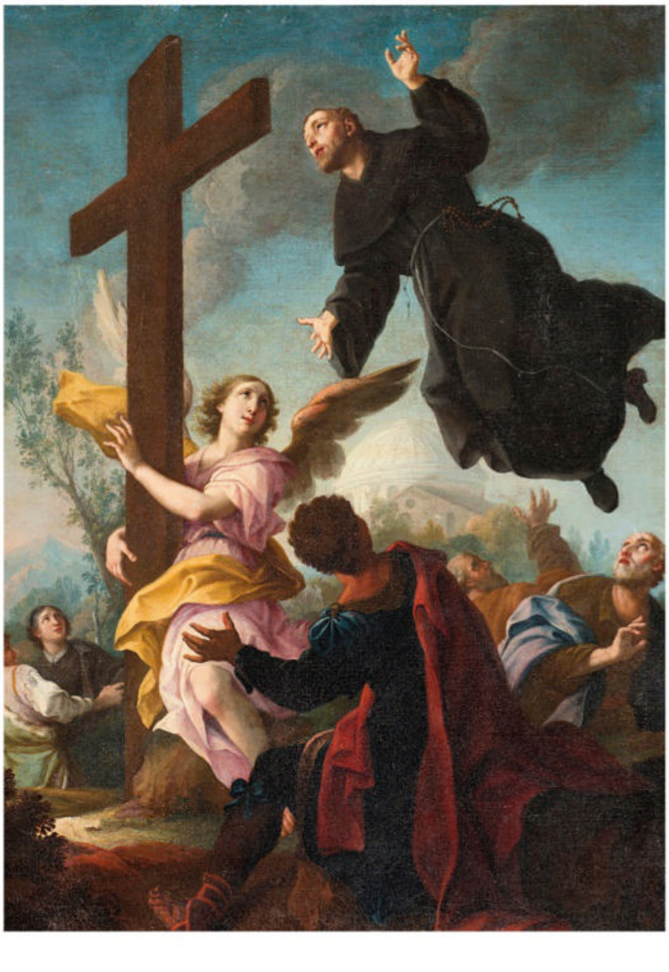
JOSEPH'S CHARACTER

For his own discussion, Nickell selected a small number of incidents from the very many (and often more instructive) narratives available. His choices are narrow and curious, appearing (in retrospect) to be selected because they could be reduced to a few telling phrases that are, by his method, easier to 'explain away'.

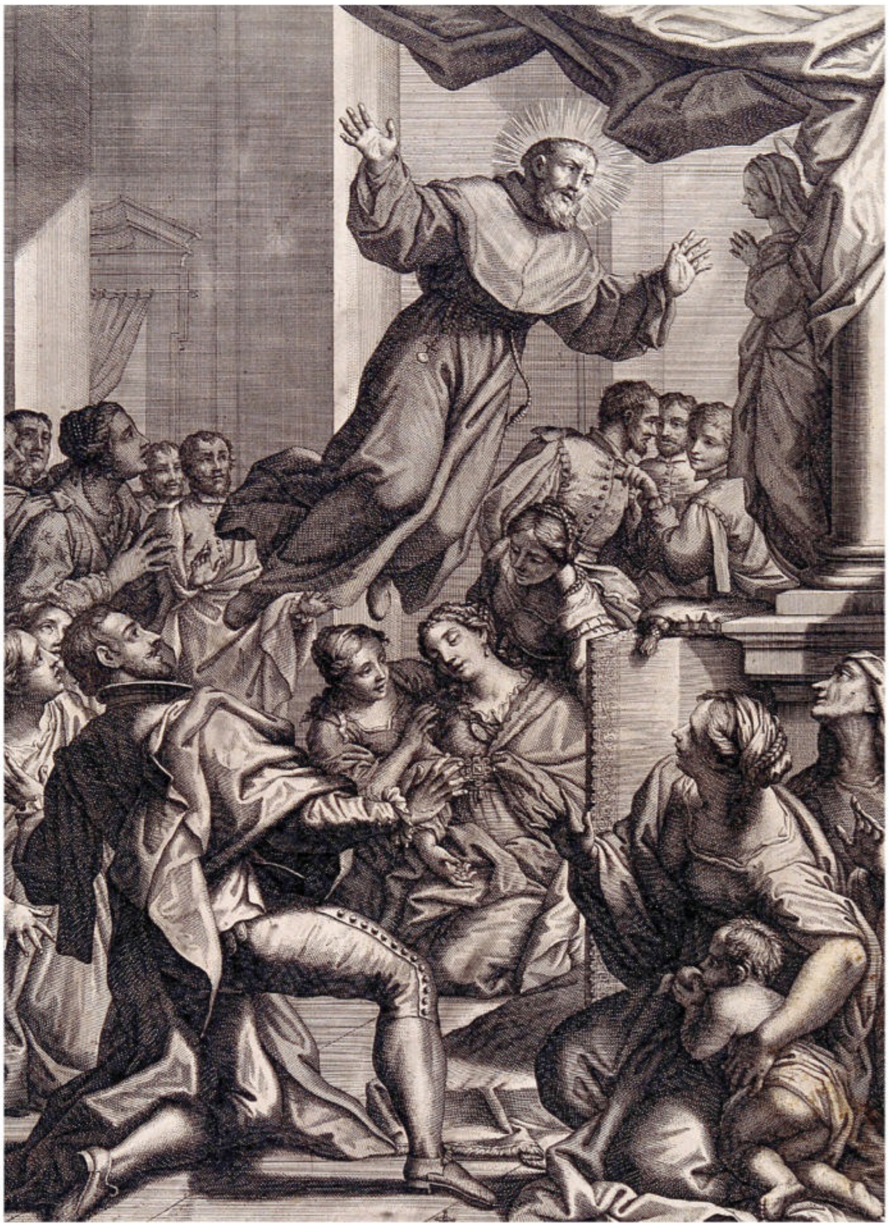
Nickell opens his case by directly confronting Grosso's *The Man Who Could Fly* with the disingenuous statement that Joseph "laid claim to the power of levitation".[22] Perhaps others made this claim about Joseph, but nowhere in the records of Joseph's words does Joseph himself make such a claim. If he had, it would have been quite out of character, contrary to his well-documented spiritual humility, and would have resulted in his condemnation by the Inquisition.

Like St Teresa of Avila and some other levitants, Joseph never sought the upliftings and prayed fervently for them to cease, especially when he was in public. All clergy are taught that presuming their own sanctity or claiming to have God's special attention is a serious sin. When in rapture, Joseph had no power over it or himself. Whatever was causing Joseph's aerial trajectories was not the kind of comic-book superhero 'power' that Nickell supposed ecstatic levitation to be.

Nickell's misdirection, then, sets the tone for what follows. There is no sensitivity in his caricature of Joseph as a slightly furtive priest, whose pretend humility hides an athletic skill with which he deceives his susceptible



ALBUM / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO



WELLCOME LIBRARY

LEFT: This chaotic scene shows one of the most famous of Joseph's levitations, in 1646, during a visit to Assisi by the Grand Admiral of Castile (who was also the Spanish ambassador). The reluctant Joseph was ordered to attend the Admiral and his family, and they watched as he entered through a small door. As soon as he saw a statue of the Virgin Mary above the altar "he screamed and flew a distance of 12 steps above the heads of the Admiral and the women, to embrace the statue... after remaining in that pose for some time, he gave another scream and, still flying through the air returned near the little door... leaving everyone dazed if not traumatized. The wife of the Admiral fainted and [he] had to revive her splashing water in her face... the Admiral himself... did not faint but became weak-kneed and flustered."

religious brothers. Cendrars's examination of Joseph, by contrast, is a joyful celebration of phenomenal surreality. To counter Nickell's portrait of Joseph, it is necessary to provide additional insights into Joseph's character.

From an early age, Joseph's spiritual humility was apparent. His distaste for owning personal possessions and privileges was lifelong and often mentioned in descriptions, as was his ready acceptance of the most menial and degrading of tasks. Joseph's whole energy was focused upon "dissolving" (his word) himself from this world, cutting all physical attachments so he could be absorbed into the Divinity he adored. In his simple view, his ordination allowed him to fulfil priestly duties and so better serve his God. Inevitably, this intensified his raptures. During the decades that he was under 'official' observation, Joseph had to ask permission for most acts, including leaving his cell. However, in Nickell's sardonic interpretation, Joseph's levitations – which began "only" after his ordination – "therefore seem contrived".

During his ecstasies, Joseph's only remaining sensorial link to the mundane world was his obedience to his Superiors. The only thing that could penetrate his rapture was the voice of his Superior ordering him to return.[23]

A SAINT IS BORN AND MADE

Joseph was born in Copertino [24] – in the 'heel' of Italy – on 17 June 1603, a sick child in a disadvantaged but pious household. His father was in hiding to protect the family from debtors, and his mother worn down by poverty and the deaths of several children. Of Joseph's toddler years little is known except that for very long periods he was bedridden. Lying in the dark, isolated, emaciated, and weak, he became increasingly preoccupied with the inner world of prayer, sometimes kneeling for hours at the small family shrine. By the age of five he was said to be "holy" and already practising fasting and even, some say, self-mortification.

Joseph's ecstasies began in his eighth year. Because his knees were persistently infected from constant kneeling, his mother would carry him to daily Mass to hear the music – the "loitering" mentioned by Nickell earlier. He would cut the swellings himself to relieve them, but that only made them worse. These ruined knees troubled Joseph for the rest of his life; yet Nickell has made them a focus for his 'theories', suggesting that the young Joseph's habit of praying on his knees "so often and so long" had actually strengthened the boy's athletic abilities so that they would "later prove useful in his 'levitations'."

A short period of schooling was curtailed because Joseph appeared to others to be "mentally retarded, dazed, detached". This is a common description of him in many publications (even those approved by the Church), suggesting 'laziness'. More frequently, we see Joseph described as socially and mentally inept, and unable to complete the simplest task. However, a closer reading of the narratives suggests an alternative; that he was already regularly experiencing the deep dissociation for which he was famous in later life.

Eventually, Joseph was apprenticed to a shoemaker, and later sent to tend a convent's donkey in Altamura. After that he was moved on to the Capuchin Friars in Martina Franca to be a lay brother. At each place he was branded as "ignorant, untutored, barely literate" and his dissociative episodes were interpreted as 'wilful laziness', for which he was often punished. He never complained. In 1625, aged 22, he was accepted by the Friars Minor at La Grottella, on the outskirts of Copertino, where despite his 'backwardness', he was welcomed for his humility, "natural simplicity and detachment". Three years later, he was ordained as a priest… and for the first time in his life he felt happy and had a vocation.

At Grottella, these ecstasies increased in frequency and duration as he spent more time 'adoring' a particular icon of the Virgin Mary and Child. His first levitation happened on 4 October 1630, when he was 27. According to Parisciani, it happened during a public procession; Joseph "soared into the air and remained ecstatic and immovable before the eyes of the stupefied crowd".

This point illustrates the evidential difficulty of our data quite well. It implies that Joseph was seen clearly by many people, in the open air, rising off the ground and remaining for some time. He did not 'fly' or fall back down but remained stationary in the air and yet we have no further description of it or supporting evidence.

LEFT: The basilica dedicated to Joseph at Osimo features this spectacular *trompe l'oeil* painting depicting Joseph levitating above the high altar.

Within four years, Joseph was known throughout Apulia as a "new St Francis". The records for this period show that Joseph spent most of his year fasting in the manner of St Francis: that is, seven drastic fasts of 40 days each in a year. He hardly slept, and regularly mortified his body with a scourge and a celice. [25] These whippings were sometimes severe and when the walls of his cell were found spattered with blood, his Superior had to order him to cease. That Joseph was able to function with any degree of normality under these conditions is itself a kind of miracle; yet Nickell portrays him as super fit and ready in an instant to perform feats that exceeded Olympic records.

A TRAIL AND THREE TRIALS

In 1636, Joseph's idyll at Grottella came to an end, heralding a period in which he suffered deep depression and, more ominously, three summons before the Inquisition.

It began with a newly appointed Father Provincial – Fr Antonio di San Mauro – who wished to make himself better known to the Apulians. He began his inaugural tour of 50 friaries by taking Joseph with him, calculating that the prospect of seeing a levitation during a Mass would swell the congregations, and thereby bolster his own standing. Joseph was horrified by the prospect of public exposure, but was overruled. The year-long tour of the province certainly succeeded, but San Mauro had underestimated the public interest in Joseph – rather than, as he had hoped, in himself.

Apulia had a reputation for being religiously conservative, having little tolerance for characters such as Joseph whose notoriety disrupted the *status quo*. This tension came to a head in a town called Giovinazza when the rural clergy became disturbed by excitable talk of 'miracles' during the Masses. Town officials ordered the prelate's party to return so that they could scrutinise Joseph more closely during his Mass. Inevitably, Joseph levitated, his mysterious scream terrifying the congregation as he rose into the air. Like Nickell today, the officials suggested that it was a "theatrical campaign on the part of Joseph and his confreres to present him as some sort of messiah".

When he returned to Assisi, an angry San Mauro accused Joseph of "feigned sanctity", castigating him for ruining his 'show'. Several years later, when Joseph faced the Inquisition in Rome, that accusation of "feigned sanctity" placed him in mortal danger. The peril was very real; as Grosso notes of that time: "Recently, three men were burned alive because they said Mass in public without having been ordained." [26]

Nickell writes that the Vatican sent Joseph "into a sort of exile" and that, for the rest of his life he was deliberately 'hidden' by the Church; however, the facts behind this complex situation are not quite the sinister cover-up by the Church that Nickell implies.

JOSEPH'S WHOLE ENERGY WAS FOCUSED UPON "DISSOLVING" HIMSELF FROM THIS WORLD

In 1638, a couple of years after the notorious chaos at Giovinazza, the disgruntled Vicar Apostolic of a vacant diocese – Monsignor Joseph Palamolla – sent a formal notice to the Inquisition at Naples drawing attention to the hermit of Grottella, accusing him of performing healings and miracles "as if he was another Messiah". It was the Inquisition's job, after all, to keep a watch for would-be messiahs, and head-off heretical threats to official dogma.

Joseph was ordered to report to the Inquisition in Naples; he walked there from Grottella – some 300km – sleeping rough. Charged with ostentation – not heresy or deception – he faced three separate periods of examination. His case was then forwarded to Rome, where he endured further questioning to determine his motivation and piety. He was completely vindicated in all four courts.

While Nickell acknowledges that Joseph was finally declared blameless, he does not process precisely what that meant. He continues his sniping as though Joseph had, instead, fooled the Inquisitors the whole time that their unblinking attention was upon him. He doesn't see the irony of it; that the Inquisition had, in effect, validated Joseph's mysterious aerial adventures.

In all, this period lasted nearly two years and left Joseph deeply shocked and depressed. The examinations had taken so long chiefly because the Inquisition didn't know what to do with him. At both Naples and Rome, Joseph had been ordered to conduct Masses under their full scrutiny before congregations of the main branches of the clergy; there could be no denial of his levitations. The Inquisitors decided, therefore, to keep him away from public attention, mindful of how easily a cultish following, which they could not control, could spring up about him. For the remainder of his years, he was moved around in secret and kept under close watch.

Ironically, this decision gave Joseph the privacy for which he yearned. Instead of returning to Grottella, Joseph was sent to the monastery in Assisi. After five years there, in 1653, he was transferred to Pietrarubbia for three months, and thence to Fossombrone, where he stayed for three years. Each relocation had been prompted when the local interest in Joseph became a nuisance.

Eventually, he arrived at Osimo, in 1657, where he died among his fellow Franciscans on 18 September 1663, aged 60.

THE LEVITATIONS EXPLAINED?

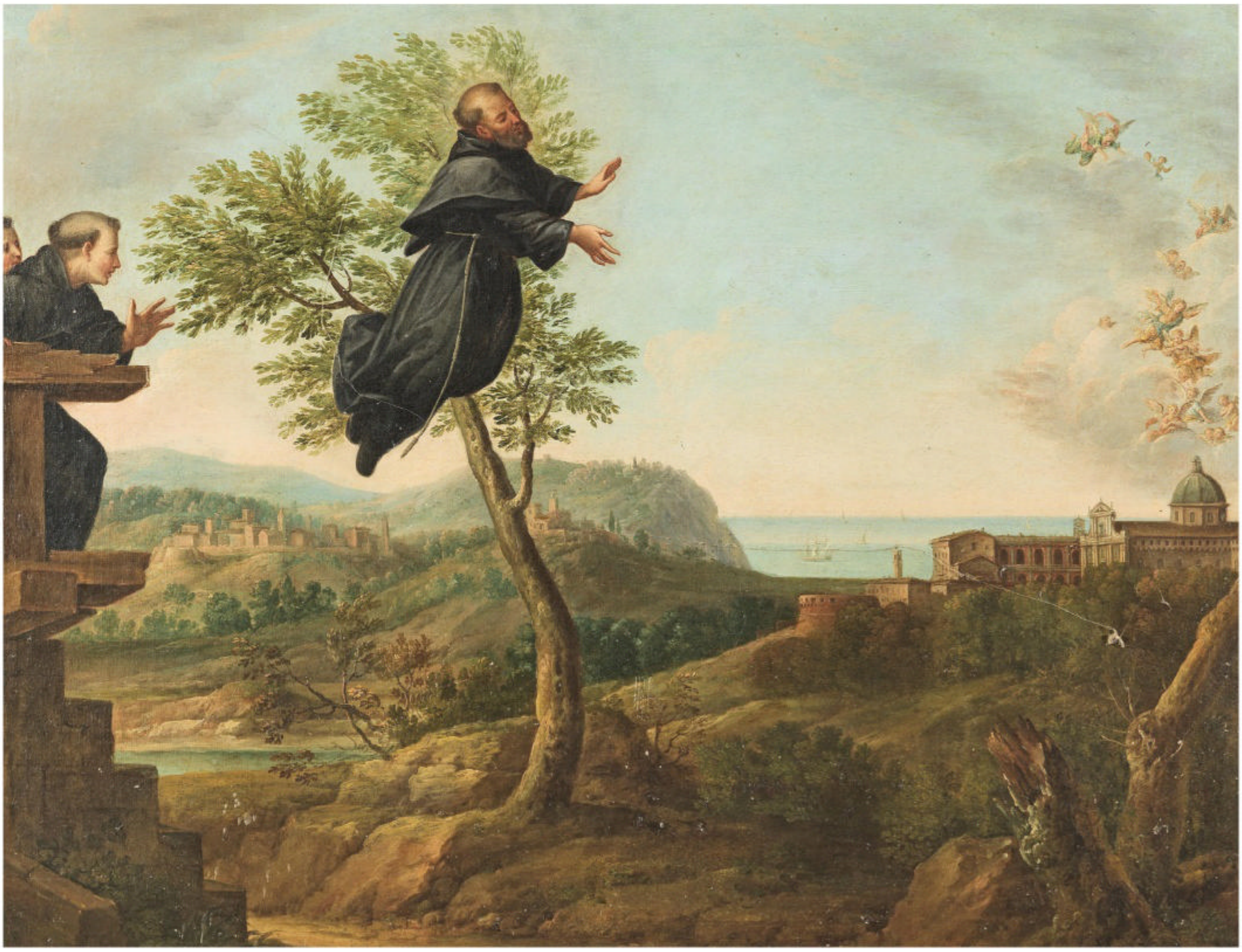
Joe Nickell's critique of Joseph's levitations begins with a visit to the friar's small cell by a boys' choir; their sublime singing sending him into ecstasy and elevation. Nickell boldly promises to the reader that he will explain Joseph's levitations – "assuming", he adds condescendingly, "that the account is not merely hearsay and embellishment". Notice that sneaky 'merely'.

According to Parisciani, who summarises the scene from Bernini, the Choirmaster of the Assisi's Sacred Convent …

"… brought three young singers of outstanding talent to Joseph's room to perform. Upon hearing the boys sing, he immediately went into ecstasy, falling into a kneeling position, then rising, and floating above the ground. To confirm what they were seeing, all three boys put their hands between Joseph's tunic and the ground. [27]

Nickell the conjuror attempts to divert our attention by declaring that these boys were "compliant". But he doesn't mean that the boys were on their best behaviour, subdued, perhaps, by the prospect of singing for the famous ecstatic wonderworker. He is setting the scene to cast the boys as poor witnesses. He feels certain that they would be so credulous that they saw what they were *culturally conditioned* to see and not what they 'actually' saw.

Nickell quite rightly points out that, in this period other cases of saintly levitation were well-known and publicly discussed, However, he supposes that the boys would have the expectations of "credulous 17th-century peasants" who "would, in all good faith, unintentionally exaggerate what had actually happened". [28] According to Nickell – who somehow knows this for certain –



BONHAMS

ABOVE: There are several accounts of Joseph soaring up to the tops of trees; but it is not known whether this painting ("The Ecstasy of Saint Joseph of Cupertino", Italian School, 18th century) depicts a particular incident or is a general illustration.

what they 'actually' saw was someone taking advantage of their 'compliance'.

Then he complains that these boys were "not aggressively skeptical" and therefore their testimony is *unreliable*. But why should they have been aggressively skeptical? They were not there as CSI investigators; they were there to sing.

"Note," he continues with an ominous wink to his readers, "that the friar's feet are never mentioned."

"Recall my earlier suggestion [..] that Joseph could subtly move from kneeling to a pre-crouch position by placing the bottoms of his toes flat on the floor [..] then moves slowly into a crouch using his well-developed muscles (you see where this is going), the still-apparently kneeling friar is witnessed rising upward – or rather his knees are seen to rise, giving that illusion. The rest is child's play, literally. The boys are invited to place their hands between the tunic and the floor. It would probably not occur to them to reach far back and search for the actual placement of Father Joseph's feet."

Deceptively simplistic, or simply deceptive? Had Nickell bothered to read further into Joseph's career, he could hardly have failed to notice the many accounts in which witnesses gather around the enraptured Joseph while he remains stationary in mid-air for some time. They would press forward to touch his robe, kiss his elevated feet and use different ways to estimate their distance from the floor.

HE "GAVE A GREAT SCREAM AND FLEW INTO THE AIR BACKWARD IN A KNEELING POSITION"

Sometimes they did much more, testing the extent of Joseph's ecstatic anæsthesia by burning, piercing, or even striking him. [29] Far from being clueless rustics, they exercised a natural curiosity – possessed even by "credulous 17th-century peasants" – to confirm what their eyes were telling them.

THE JOY OF ILLITERACY

Nickell's next selections turn the focus upon accounts of Joseph's aerial soaring towards an altar and apparently hovering in the air above it. For example: one Christmas, Joseph invited some shepherds to bring their music into the church. Entering the nave with them, he began to sing and dance and was literally carried away. Bernini records what the shepherds believed they had observed:

"[Joseph] suddenly sighed and loudly screamed and flew up in the air like a bird, halfway to the ceiling, where he continued dancing *above the main altar*, and went to embrace the tabernacle that was a considerable distance *above* the main altar… for about 15 minutes …" [my emphasis] [30]

Nickell states with astonishing certainty that these shepherds "were probably illiterate". [31] "It is apparent from [Joseph's] movements," he writes, "that [Joseph] *bounded in increments*, onto the altar" [my emphasis]. Joseph's aerial dancing *above* the altar is subsumed into the suggestion that he must have "rested" on the brackets that held the candles and, by "embracing" them, only appeared to be hovering in mid-air.[32] Bernini's account supplies nothing to support Nickell's interpretation.

"In other words," Nickell continues, "[Joseph] was never simply floating in air, as sources may seem to imply." He ignores the fact that these 'illiterates' had deposed under oath to several Process officials, so this is precisely what they were implying.

Ahead of his next big 'reveal', he telegraphs, with another wink, that he has figured out Joseph's "rising and floating". The answer, when it comes, seems both inadequate and completely speculative.

"I would wager that [Joseph] mimed this by stretching himself upward until he artfully stood on tiptoe, then danced lightly in place so as to create the illusion of 'hovering' just above the ground."

Did anyone notice this tiptoeing dance? Stupefied by his own cleverness, Nickell bounds onto the altar of his newfound theory of incremental "bounding". Where the narrative says Joseph "flew up" rather gracefully, Nickell changes it to some sort of energetic shuffle "just above the ground".

There is indeed genuine mystery surrounding Joseph's 'take-off' method. The narratives all seem to imply it was instantaneous, regardless of whether Joseph started off kneeling or standing. But Nickell knows otherwise. Joseph must have moved from where he was standing or kneeling and this movement was not noticed, he says, because it happened quickly and, distracted by Joseph's shout, was soon forgotten, as the witnesses' eyes naturally followed Joseph's astonishing aerobatics. Nickell is looking for some kind of run-up, crouching to spring, or backing-up to make that "bounding" leap forwards; but he can't find it because no one saw it.

Just to be clear, in the entire archive available to us, there is no mention of anyone spotting Joseph practising or rehearsing such circus-type movements as "bounding through the air". Nickell could have asked instead, why *wasn't* Joseph spotted cheating… but that would have undermined his own brilliant ideas.

GRAVITY DEFIED

Next, Nickell tackles what he calls Joseph's "extreme defiances of gravity". It's a powerfully evocative word, "defiances", surreptitiously reinforcing the idea that Joseph, a humble friar, is wilfully subverting our understanding of both physics and perception.

The first 'defiance' takes the form of Joseph seeming to hover in place in mid-air much as Rosmi describes happening during Joseph's very first levitation, the open-air parade in Assisi in 1630. At other times he would appear to be unnaturally 'frozen' or fixed in a particular pose (eg. kneeling) *while* he travelled through the air. These strange 'hoverings' varied between a few seconds to 30 minutes or more of "sustained floating" in position. Nickell simply says:

"Our analysis revealed that Joseph did not hover in the air but, after rapidly ascending, he then rested on some support such as a tree limb or held onto some fixed object such as a statue."

According to Bernini's account of one incident – unique in the whole archive – two cardinals watched as Joseph was suspended for some time, kneeling in the air before a tabernacle. As he hung there, in mid-air, one of his sandals fell to the floor. [33] For a moment, it seems, normal gravitation was restored, but only for the sandals, not for the levitant. In the distance, I can hear Charles Fort barely stifling a giggle.

When Grosso writes that these mysterious suspensions "seem to point to the reality of an unrecognised force of nature," and that their astonishing duration is "enough to render implausible the claim that they were tricks of perception", Nickell accuses him of "gushing".

We are not yet done with the "defiances of gravity". Besides vertical and 'floating' elevations, there are other mysterious variants which are extremely rare in the annals of human flight. For example: in a choir, Joseph heard the phrase *Mater Divine Gratie*, and flew forward up and "over three rows of friars". [34] As Leroy points out, the *Bull* of Joseph's canonisation acknowledges that "No saint can be compared to Joseph in this respect." [35]

More astonishing are Joseph's eerie flights *backward*, which challenge reason as well as gravity, and certainly defy Nickell's comic hypotheses about 'kneeling' and 'bounding'. Although Grosso provides several instances of each, Nickell (probably wisely) makes no attempt to exorcise them.

An example: while helping to clean a relic of St Francis's in Assisi, Joseph shot up and *backwards* over the heads of the brothers behind him. [36] The most famous of these retro-flights occurred in 1650, when Prince Johan-Frederick of Brunswick visited Assisi to consult Joseph about his career. During the service, Joseph "gave a great scream and flew into the air *backward in a kneeling position*". [my emphasis] [37]

Equally well-observed were the moments when Joseph carried another person into the air with him. It is difficult to believe that these flying companions were also athletic accomplices. I counted four of these double levitations in Bernini's *Vita*: the most famous happened when he lifted a 'lunatic' into the air by his hair and hovered there for some time.

Another seemingly trivial form of 'defiance' has Joseph springing high into the topmost branches of a tree only to remain there for some time. He cites the well-known incident of Joseph walking outside with a brother who spontaneously mentions how beautiful the sky looks. Nickell continues (citing Bernini almost correctly): "These words seemed like an invitation for Padre Giuseppe to fly up into the sky, and so he did, letting out a loud cry and bounding from the ground to fly up to the top of an olive tree [where he] stayed up there about a half hour." [38]

Nickell reminds us again of his pedestrian theory of Joseph's prowess at bounding and leaping, which he now takes for a proven fact. He establishes (via Wikipedia) that olive trees are "short and squat" – as though that proves that Joseph's tree was likewise – and was therefore within the reach of athletic "bounding".

Nickell seems to accept the witness's observation that Joseph had "landed on his knees on a branch that kept shaking gently, as though a bird were perched on the branch" and yet he says nothing more about the allegedly 'mundane' feat of leaping upward, to say a man's height, to land in a kneeling position (with ruined knees?) on a branch so slender that it "kept shaking" and then maintain that position for nearly 30 minutes.

Instead, Nickell diverts our attention again with levity of his own, mocking the "prowess of the supposedly catlike friar" who, when he came out of his trance (after half an hour up there) and realised his predicament, cried for help. Joseph's companion Antonio had to fetch a ladder to help him down. On another occasion, in a garden at

ABOVE: There have been several attempts to portray Joseph's levitations in mainstream movies. This scene from *The Reluctant Saint* (1962), directed by Edward Dmytryk, with Maximilian Schell as Joseph, is probably the most careful dramatisation, despite the film being labelled an "historical comedy".

SAN GIUSEPPE DA COPERTINO

REALY EASY STAR / TONI SPAGONE

ABOVE: St Joseph's preserved body continues to defy gravity, now held aloft by angels in the crypt of the basilica in Osimo. **BELOW:** The CSI's Joe Nickell.

Fossombrone, Joseph was seen by a group of his brothers "soaring through the air *on a level with the crowns of the trees* in the garden. He remained there, *kneeling in the air, for more than two hours*." [my emphasis] [39]

Significantly absent from the testimony of the primary witnesses is any sense of *disbelief* about the levitation they had just seen. Their difficulty was not one of credulity but of processing what they had seen. Some witnesses (mainly Catholics) reported (as we might expect) with "their faces bathed in tears" that the levitations confirmed their belief in miracles. The only record of a reaction from a sceptic, was that he rued the day he had seen something to shake his disbelief. No one ever shrugged and said, "I don't believe it," or "Look, he's only bounding!"

THE OPERATION

Having criticised Joe Nickell's choice of incidents from the records of Joseph's life, it is only fair that I offer what I think is one of the best documented. In the following account, two doctors are attempting to treat a sore on one of Joseph's legs. The incident occurred shortly before his death in 1663 and is important for being carefully observed at close quarters for fully 15 minutes by the two competent medical professionals. These witnesses were not the "credulous peasants" targeted by Nickell, and no 'bounding' was involved. Here is the deposition of Francesco de Pierpaoli, one of the attending surgeons:

"At the time of Brother Joseph's last illness, I had to cauterise his leg, in compliance with the orders of Dr Giacinto Carosi. Brother Joseph was sitting on a chair with his leg resting on my knees. I was already applying the iron to carry out the operation; I saw that Brother Joseph was in a state of bliss, unconscious and completely abstracted. His arms were extended, his eyes open and gazing toward heaven, his mouth was agape and his respiration seemed to have ceased completely.

SGERBIC / WIKIMEIDA COMMONS

"I observed that he was elevated about a span [40] above the chair, but otherwise in the same position as before the rapture commenced. I tried to lower his leg, but without success; it remained stretched out. A fly had settled on the pupil of his eye, and the more I tried to chase it away, the more obstinately it seemed to come back to the same place; in the end, I had to leave it there.

"In order to observe Brother Joseph more closely, I went down on my knees. [Dr Carosi] was also examining him, and we both recognised the fact that Brother Joseph was very visibly transported, out of his senses and, furthermore, he was indeed suspended in the air as I have already said.

"This situation had been going on for a quarter of an hour when Father Silvestro Evangelista, who lived in the convent at Osimo, came in. After observing the phenomenon, he commanded Joseph, by his holy vows of obedience, to come back to himself, and he called him by name. Joseph smiled and came back to his senses. [41]

I wonder how Doubting Joe would explain what went on in this scenario.

THE SANDAL DROPS

Nickell's explanations are also a form of that special pleading that William of Occam called "multiplying the entities". For Nickell to be correct, we would have to suppose widespread collusion at all levels of the Catholic Church. As Grosso puts it:

"To explain the whole mass of reports and claims… we would have to assume that large numbers of people were having the same illusion, systematically misinterpreting the movements of one friar for 35 years, and that all grades of people were swearing in public that they saw things they only imagined. We would have to assume that numerous Church authorities were lying or exaggerating and for some unknown reason hiding and shunting around a completely innocent, non-meditating friar. One would have to posit an incredible amount of mendacity and stupidity on the part of Rosmi, Nuti, Bernini, Lambertini, and all the process deposers who recorded their observations." [42]

On one of the CSI websites, Nickell formally declares "that mysteries should neither be hyped nor dismissed, but instead carefully investigated with a view toward solving them." In his own work on Joseph, Nickell began with apparent dismissals, has not investigated much and far from solving anything has added only bizarre distortions. This is hardly the fair or rigorous treatment we might expect from the Grand Inquisitor of the CSI.

His message is clear: 'human levitation' does not and cannot exist; therefore, there is no scholastic or scientific value in debating its supposed evidence. When he announces that there is "nothing to see here", it is because when he looks, he sees only 'superstitious peasants' and 'compliant' illiterates.

The levitations of St Joseph explained? I don't think so.

BOB RICKARD founded *FT* in 1973 and was its co-editor for 30 years. He is the author of numerous books and articles on forteana.

NOTES

Thanks go to Michael Grosso (for help in finding documentation); Theo Paijmans (for turning me on to Cendrars); to Jerry Clark (for sound criticism); and to Mikhail Gershtein (a fortean's BookFinder General).

1 Two excellent exceptions are Serinity Young, *Women who Fly* (2018) and Carlos Eire, *They Flew* (2023).

2 Joe Nickell, Ph.D., is a Senior Research Fellow of the Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI). A former stage magician, private investigator, and teacher, he is author of numerous investigative books. The publication of Michael Grosso's two books on the life and phenomena of St Joseph galvanised Nickell to refute Grosso's conclusion that levitation was an actual but unknown force. Grosso's books are *The Man Who Could Fly: St Joseph of Copertino and The Mystery of Levitation* (2016) and *Wings of Ecstasy: Domenico Bernini's Vita of St Joseph of Copertino* (1722/2017).

3 Nickell wrote on "both the topic of levitation and Joseph himself briefly"; firstly, in *Looking for a Miracle* (1991; Prometheus Books, pp,211–216). All my Nickell citations are taken from his article 'Secrets of 'The Flying Friar': Did St. Joseph of Copertino Really Levitate?', in *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol.42, no.4 (July/August, 2018). It is online at: https://skepticalinquirer.org/2018/07/secrets-of-the-flying-friar-did-st-joseph-of-copertino-really-levitate/

4 This popular mantra – attributed to the Blessed Carl Sagan – that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" is traditionally used by 'skeptics' to ward off 'pseudoscientific' claims, asserting that the more unlikely a claim is (i.e., when compared to orthodox opinion), the greater is the standard of proof required of it. See also: https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11406-016-9779-7

5 Herbert Thurston, *The Physical Phenomena of Mysticism* (1952), pp.2-3.

6 The Pyrrhic philosophy of 'scepticism' to denote "someone who is unsatisfied and still looking for truth". For my own use, I contrast that with the American spelling 'skepticism', which has become more associated with the vocal lobby of the materialist-rationalist-reductionist 'skeptics' of CSI, who argue that there is nothing further worth looking into. The fortean usage of 'scepticism' implies an honest "I don't know" and our version of Occam's Razor is: "Cut away the false and let's see what's left."

7 Straw man; see its 'Skeptic's Dictionary' webpage definition: "One of the characteristics of a cogent refutation of an argument is that *the argument one is refuting be represented fairly and accurately*. To distort or misrepresent an argument one is trying to refute is called the straw man fallacy. It doesn't matter whether the misrepresentation or distortion is accidental and due to misunderstanding the argument or is intentional and aimed at making it easier to refute. Either way, one commits the straw man fallacy."

8 Ibid: "In other words, the attacker using a 'straw man' argument is refuting a position of his own creation, not the position of someone else. The refutation may appear to be a good one to someone unfamiliar with the original argument."

9 Biographical dates for Leroy have been scarce. These are from the Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

10 Blaise Cendrars, *Le Lotissement du Ciel* (1949) p.137. I used the Paragon House edition *Sky*: *Memoires* (1992, p.78) translated by Nina Rootes.

11 The Bollandist Society was founded by the Jesuits in the early 17th century to study and preserve the hagiographical literature on Christian saints. Their primary work – the *Acta Sanctorum* – currently extends to 68 volumes, arranged by a saint's feast date; Joseph's is 18 September.

12 Thurston, op. cit., p.2.

13 *Acta Sanctorum*, cited by Thurston, p.101.

14 Arcangelo Rosmi, *I tre diari (1645-1652) dell'abate Arcangelo Rosmi su san Giuseppe da Copertino*, ('The three diaries (1645-1652) of the abbot Arcangelo Rosmi on St Joseph of Copertino'; sometimes englished as *Diary of a 14-year tenure in Assisi*). This diary was included with Nuti's *Vita*, in *Fra Giuseppe Desa da Copertino, Proceso Assisano di Beaificazione* (1666) published in 2013 by the Historical Society of Lecce.

15 We are reminded that Rudolf Otto coined the word 'numinous' to convey what Bernini has called a moment of "sacred terror". This is no *ordinary* fear but one that stimulates awe and holiness, like the original meaning of 'panic'. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy* (1950), p.14ff.

16 A witness would be cautioned: "whether everything he had written might be nothing more than an hallucination, or imagination, and the transport he had glimpsed simply a reflection of the sunlight, an optical illusion or the result of some other natural cause" and again "warned to take extreme care not to exaggerate the facts out of a misguided sense of devotion, and to describe them without altering them in any way, since saints have no need for their causes to be upheld by misrepresentations of this kind" and finally, before signing asked "if he wished to modify any part of his deposition." Cendrars, op. cit., pp.96-97.

17 Grosso (2016), pp.146, 219-223; and Grosso (2017), pp.222-223.

18 Grosso (2017), pp.224-225.

19 Its full title – *San Giuseppe da Copertino (1603-1663) alla luce dei nuovi documenti* – proclaims Parisciano's discovery of new documents from all the places where Joseph stayed.

20 Eric Dingwall, *Some Human Oddities* (1947).

21 Cendrars (1992), pp.25-148.

22 See the opening sentence of Nickell's 'Secrets of 'The Flying Friar'.

23 Joseph claimed that he could never hear his Superior's call, but that God did and then ended his rapture.

24 Carlos Eire (see note 1) explains that the two spellings 'Copertino' and 'Cupertino' are both valid; a legacy from when Italian territories were administered by Spanish or French regimes.

25 Celice: a device for self-mortification or penance, ranging in type from a coarse sackcloth shift to a spiked belt, chain or garter, worn under clothing.

26 Grosso (2016), p.25.

27 Gustavo Parisciani, *San Giuseppe da Copertino: Alla Luce Dei Nuovi Documenti* (1963), p.443.

28 As opposed, perhaps, to those who in bad faith intentionally exaggerate what they imagined happened?

29 Joseph's biographer, Fr Nuti recorded that often "to bring him back they would drag him on the ground, pinch him, twist his fingers, put candles in his mouth and the like." Nuti, cited in Grosso (2017), pp.116-117.

30 Bernini (1722), p.26.

31 What on this Earth has *literacy* got to do with the ability to perceive? Nickell's slander offers no evidence that literates perceive better than illiterates. Nickell's perception of these "peasants" reminds me of their French fellows who reported to the great French scientist Lavoisier, in 1772, that they had seen a meteorite crash to earth, only to be dismissed because, he declared, "There are no stones in the sky!"

32 Bernini's text (see note 29) does indeed say Joseph "embraced the tabernacle with both arms"; but, in the same paragraph says that "the tabernacle was a considerable distance above the main altar" the surface of which was "filled with flaming candles". The "marvellous" implication here is that Joseph did not disturb the candles but hovered above them, kneeling and stationary, for 15 minutes.

33 Bernini (1722), p.145.

34 Bernini (1722), p.144.

35 Leroy (1928), p.89.

36 Bernini (1722), p.152.

37 Bernini, cited in Grosso (2017), pp.82-85. I treat this incident at length in my article 'Leibniz and the Flying Monk', in *Fortean Times* 403 (March 2021) pp.48-52. The direct result of this encounter was that the Protestant Prince Frederick converted to Catholicism, thereby handing the Hanoverian succession to his brother.

38 Bernini, cited in Grosso (2017), p.138. Nickell introduces the idea of 'springboards': they "were available since the Middle Ages to propel acrobats," he says, adding impressive antiphrasis, "although I do not suggest Joseph used one".

39 Ibid.

40 Span: approximately 6-9 inches, estimated against the spread of a human hand from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the little finger.

41 Grosso (2017), p117, p.122.

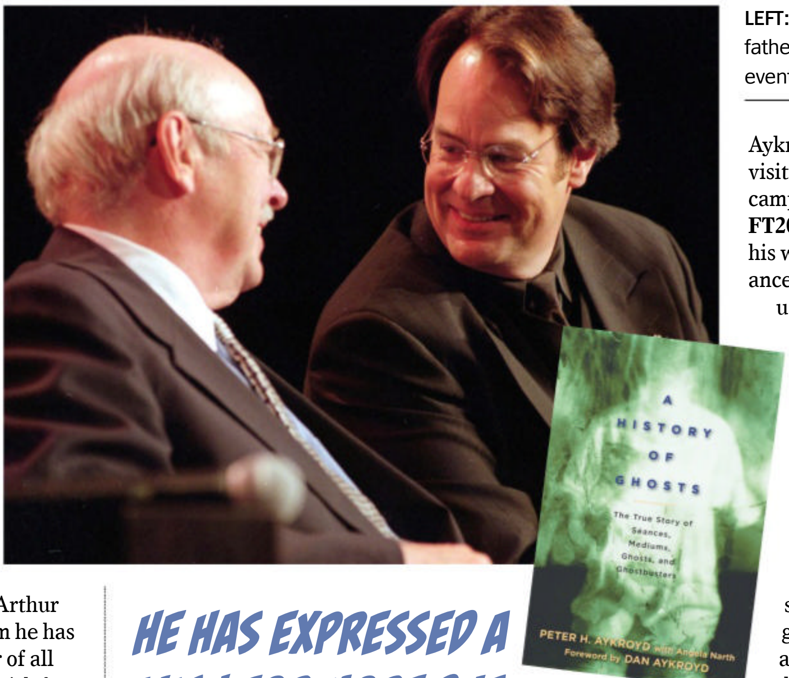
42 Grosso (2016), p.87. Dingwall agrees: in the appendix to his account of Joseph, he writes that he could not believe that the Catholic officials who vouched for Joseph's elevations "were all lying or engaged in a system of deceit for the purpose of bolstering up the reputation of a fraudulent friar." Dingwall (1947), p.162. Prosper Lambertini later became Pope Benedict XIV.

REAL GHOSTS AND CRYSTAL SKULLS
THE WEIRD LIFE OF DAN AYKROYD

Dan Aykroyd is a world-famous comic actor, widely known for such classics as *Ghostbusters* and *The Blues Brothers*, but he is also a prominent advocate for paranormal issues. **BRETT TAYLOR** explains how the creation of the ghostbusters wasn't just a question of comedy, but the result of a lifelong fascination with the unexplained.

Dan Aykroyd has always embraced the weird in all its varied manifestations. For example, in 2005 the Canadian actor hosted a documentary called *Dan Aykroyd Unplugged on UFOs* and has even been described as "the celebrity face of MUFON [Mutual UFO Network]".[1] On a recent podcast appearance he (somewhat half-heartedly) defended TV psychic John Edward to a sceptical Joe Rogan, who repeatedly stated that Edward's credibility had been debunked.[2] Aykroyd encourages people to read about 'The Ghost of Flight 401', which he calls "the most famous ghost story of all time", and regularly namechecks such fortean figures as Oliver Lodge, Lord Hill-Norton, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Hans Holzer, whom he has saluted as "the greatest ghostbuster of all time". He has publicly expressed a wish for more DNA testing on samples of ectoplasm.

ALL IN THE FAMILY



A HISTORY OF GHOSTS
The True Story of Séances, Mediums, Ghosts, and Ghostbusters
PETER H. AYKROYD with Angela Narth
Foreword by DAN AYKROYD

RICK EGLINTON / TORONTO STAR VIA GETTY IMAGES

LEFT: Dan Aykroyd and his father Peter Aykroyd at an event in Toronto in 1999.

Aykroyd came by his interests naturally, growing up in a family of Spiritualists. His great-grandfather, Dr Samuel Augustus Aykroyd, was a regular visitor to the Spiritualist camp at Lily Dale (see **FT205:30-37**) and he and his wife hosted regular séances at their home, often using a medium called Walter Ashurst.

When Dan's uncle Maurice interrupted one of these at the age of four, a ghost trumpet fell to the floor and young Maurice was blamed. Dan's father, Peter Hugh Aykroyd, started attending his grandfather's séances as a child, and kept the habit for the rest of his life: "From eight years old to 87 years old, it's been a passion of mine," he said. In 2009 Peter, after retiring from the Canadian civil service, co-wrote *A History of Ghosts: The True Story of Séances, Mediums and Ghosts and Ghostbusters.*

HE HAS EXPRESSED A WISH FOR MORE DNA TESTING ON SAMPLES OF ECTOPLASM

In 2014, he donated Samuel Aykroyd's extensive papers – including letters and séance messages – as well as his own, to the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections.

Peter insisted there was nothing religious about the Spiritualist movement, which he said should be called "Spiritism": "It's very much like a performance, and I make the point in the book… The medium was the main performer… very much like a theatrical performance." [3] Peter's work as a civil servant involved the planning of public activities, and he worked as a production manager on a 1951 film, *Breakdown*, so he had picked up a little knowledge of stagecraft; clearly, the notion of ghosts as show biz was passed on to Dan.

The actor has said that his family's history and stories fired his imagination and fed into the creation of *Ghostbusters*. Even Dan's birth was heralded by ghosts. His mother Lorraine, normally sceptical, recalled seeing two apparitions while nursing little Dan. As the apparitions faded, she realised they were her parents, who presumably came back from the dead to see their newborn grandson.

It's perhaps not surprising that Dan would grow up to cultivate an eccentric image. Working on the show that made him famous, *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*), Aykroyd liked to describe himself as "a genuine mutant" due to his webbed toes. He told a friend: "When you look at that floor and see the floor, I look at the floor and see molecules." [4]

On getting married, Aykroyd and his new bride Donna Dixon bought a 4,828-square-foot (450-square-metre) mansion on Woodrow Wilson Drive in Hollywood, only to find it haunted by a pair of ghosts; they had mischievous habits like playing with Dixon's jewellery and turning on her husband's Stairmaster. One of these spooks was apparently the spirit of a previous male inhabitant who'd died on a hillside next to the house and was buried on the same spot. The other was more famous: the ghost of singer "Mama" Cass Elliott, who had lived in the house in the Sixties. Cass died in London, but that didn't bother Ackroyd: "I'm sure it's Mama Cass," he insisted, "because you get the feeling it's a big ghost." [5]

Aykroyd had a close encounter with the male spirit, which he took to be gay, when he felt his bed mattress depress, as though someone was sitting on it. "Not meaning to discriminate," the actor said, "I just wiggled up right next to him and it was a rump-to-rump sleep for the night… A gay ghost doesn't bother me." This bed incident was the inspiration for *Ghostbusters*' raciest comic bit, the so-called "ghost blowjob". In the brief scene, Aykroyd's character Ray Stantz is visited by a blonde female ghost who makes the finger-to-lips "Ssshh" gesture and disappears, followed by a closeup of the actor's pants being unbuckled and unzipped. Many viewers interpret this as an indication the ghost is about to perform oral sex on Aykroyd. The scene's concluding shot shows him falling out of bed, indicating that this was probably just a dream. Aykroyd liked to recount his own, seemingly real, experience, though his wife disapproved, thinking it would make it difficult if they ever wanted to sell the house.[6]

FLIXPIX / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

ABOVE: Harold Ramis, Bill Murray and Dan Aykroyd in the 1984 hit *Ghostbusters*. **LEFT:** The reportedly haunted house on Woodrow Wilson Drive where Aykroyd had a close encounter with a gay ghost.

Dixon's fears were unfounded, because in 2008 the mansion was bought by actress Beverly D'Angelo. She too had a strange experience, witnessing her carefully laid out jewellery rearranging itself to the accompaniment of a "skittering of sound". "That was absolutely freakish," the actress said. No word on whether the jewellery went back to her preferred arrangement afterwards. Both Aykroyd and D'Angelo's experiences sound like waking dreams. Aykroyd admittedly awakening "in a trance", while D'Angelo was in "drifting-off mode" when she saw the jewellery moving on her mantlepiece.[7]

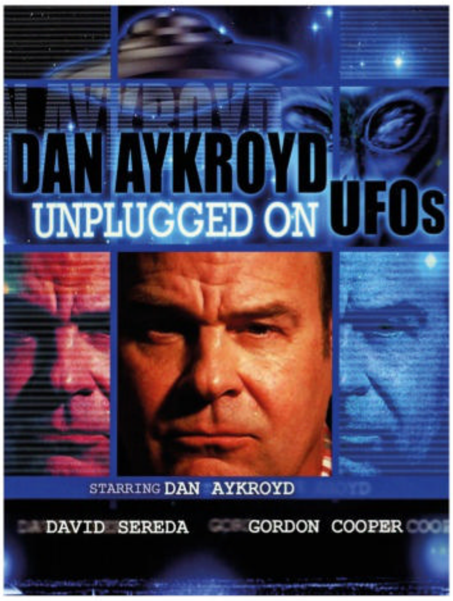
WHO YOU GONNA CALL?

Reading parapsychology journals proved to be a lucrative habit for Aykroyd, as it inspired his biggest comedy hit: "One day I read an article on quantum physics and parapsychology, and I thought wouldn't it be great to marry this concept in a fantasy, that there could actually be equipment which would enable one to, you know, entrap a phantom spirit?" [8] He began work on a 40-page treatment for a movie in which he envisioned he would star with his friend John Belushi. The movie, of course, was 1984's *Ghostbusters*, which grossed around 300 million dollars, making it the highest-earning comedy hit yet made. Belushi didn't make it as the movie's star, dying in 1982 of a speedball overdose, but he did live on in the movie in the form of the green ghost Slimer, whose ravenous hot dog-craving personality was inspired by Aykroyd's late friend.[9]

For the movie's eventual script, Aykroyd accepted Harold Ramis as co-writer, but first Ramis had to pass a test. Ramis didn't believe in life after death.[10] Aykroyd wasn't just kidding around. He claims his mission was "bringing in the vernacular and the real science of the paranormal into a comedy". Ramis knew that to work with Aykroyd he'd have to show respect for the belief system of Spiritualism. What impressed Aykroyd wasn't so much Ramis's sense of humour as "the breadth of knowledge that he had about quantum physics and Spiritualism and myth… You know, the history of mediumship. He knew who Madame Blavatsky was, the psychics. He knew who the Fox Sisters were. He was aware of all these names, of Swedenborg… Also Zecharia Sitchin and ancient biblical myths… He got all the references". [11]

WATCHING THE SKIES

Besides his ghostly encounters, Aykroyd has had his share of other odd experiences. During the Eighties he and Donna were in upstate New York on a night when thousands of people across Canada and New York State witnessed a pink vortex in the sky, many of them claiming they had been compelled to go outside, whereupon they witnessed the strange phenomenon. Aykroyd didn't see the vortex, but he claims he was awakened in an unusual manner, telling his wife: "They're calling me. I want to go outside. Something outside wants me to come and see them." However, his wife convinced him to go back to sleep.[12]



ABOVE LEFT: Aykroyd's interest in UFOs came to the fore in this 2005 documentary. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Aykroyd and the *Psi Factor* team. **BELOW:** The launch of the actor's Crystal Head Vodka was another opportunity for him to share his interest in the paranormal. **FACING PAGE:** Aykroyd and co in 2024's *Ghostbusters: Frozen Empire*.

On the Larry King show in 2013, Aykroyd responded to J Michael Long's Facebook query, "Have you personally seen a UFO"? by simply stating, "I've seen four". [13] For the BUILD live interview series, Aykroyd was more specific, mentioning a sighting on his farm as well as "a really weird one" on the 23rd floor of Montreal's Queen Elizabeth Hotel: "I'm sittin' there with some friends, and I see this… it looked like an air mattress. But 150ft [46m] long by 50ft [15m] wide." He and his friends watched this strange illuminated air mattress (through the window, presumably) as it glided over the St Lawrence River.[14] Not only that, he has also described a sighting at Martha's Vineyard of two strange craft moving simultaneously. He somehow estimated the craft to be at a height of 50,000ft (15,240m) in the air, moving at a speed of 20,000 miles per hour (32,190 kp/h).[15]

CRYSTAL SKULLS

In 2008 Aykroyd debuted his Crystal Head Vodka. Aykroyd and portrait artist John Alexander were inspired by a mutual fascination with the legend of the 13 crystal skulls (see **FT327:28-35**). The bottle's designer was the aptly named Bruni Glass, who boasted that his work was of a "quality and complexity" never before attempted in a liquor bottle. The bottle was modelled on the real crystal skulls, of which there are supposedly seven in existence today. (Aykroyd noted that a woman in the American Southwest had to put her skull in the closet after it began to speak to her).

The vodka was launched with a promotional video beginning with the statement: "I am Dan Aykroyd. Since childhood I have been fascinated with the invisible world." He showed Hubert C Provand's famous picture of the Brown Lady of Raynham Hall (**FT215:50, 218:17, 415:20**) before dipping into the legend of the skulls. He went on to imply that his vodka bottles would bring us the closest we have ever been to this invisible world: "There is no jar of ectoplasm, and they won't show us the bodies at Roswell. We've had nothing to touch, until now." Citing a recent Indiana Jones movie, Aykroyd suggested some of the skulls could be "extraterrestrial in origin", noting that the Mayans claimed they received theirs as a gift "from a higher power". The skulls represented the "symbiology of life" and Aykroyd hoped his vodka would connect modern drinkers to "the skulls' purpose on Earth", mainly "a less violent and more harmonious world" based on "respect" for "higher power sources" and steeped in acceptance of the afterlife.

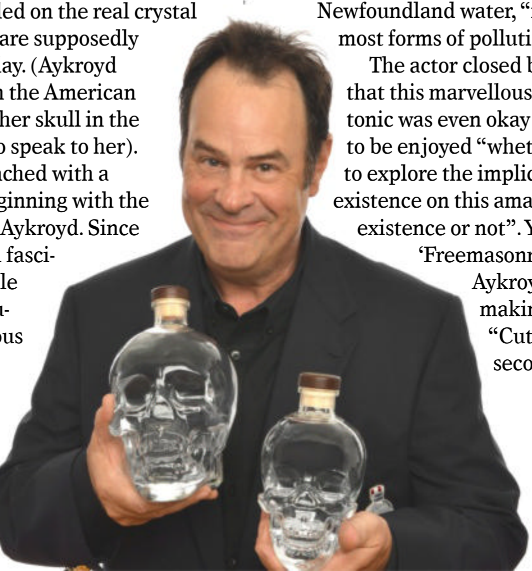
"We are challenging traditional belief with the legend", Aykroyd boldly claimed. He believed that such a challenge was easier to accept if powered by "joy", and what better way to spread joy than with liquor? "Very pure alcoholic beverage", he specified, "deep aquifer pure spirit vodka… created in an earnest and heartfelt power" and crafted with a "very slight creamy sweetness" by the Newfoundland and Labrador Liquor Organization, noted for the purity of their Newfoundland water, "far away from most forms of pollution".

The actor closed by implying that this marvellous life-affirming tonic was even okay for sceptics, to be enjoyed "whether you wish to explore the implications of your existence on this amazing plane of existence or not". YouTube poster 'Freemasonry Watch' claims Aykroyd can be seen making a Masonic "Cut Sign" at the 23 second mark, supposedly as a mystic plea for success with his new liquor business. The actual gesture, in which Aykroyd places his right hand inside his jacket pocket, just before the commercial cuts somewhat haltingly to a closeup shot, actually occurs at about 20 seconds in. The mundane explanation is that Aykroyd was simply giving a signal to his cameraman to cut and move on to the next set-up.

THE TV FILES

Psi Factor: Chronicles of the Paranormal premiered in 1996 and lasted four seasons, featuring a team of paranormal investigators placed in fictionalised scenarios familiar from fortean legend. The show claimed to be inspired "by the actual case files of the Office of Scientific Investigation and Research". Viewers who tuned in to see the comic actor hosting this goofy *X-Files* knockoff could easily have assumed the whole thing was a joke, and yet Aykroyd's poker-faced introductions and closing summations were convincing enough that some people were convinced the yarns were true.

Psi Factor was created by Dan's younger brother Peter along with ufologist Christopher Chacon, but Aykroyd was the public face of the show, and thus awarded in absentia a "Snuffed Candle" Award for "Distorted Treatments of Science" by the sceptical group CSICOP. A statement by the group called Aykroyd "a long-time promoter of all sorts of paranormal claims". Council member Joe Nickell (see pp. 28-37 this issue) joked about informing Aykroyd "by mental telepathy", to no response. Nickell wrote Aykroyd requesting the actor provide "full particulars" on a *Psi Factor* episode in which a NASA meteor investigation led to a discovery of giant eggs, one of which produced a flea the size of a hog. Nickell was intrigued by an Aykroyd appearance on *Entertainment Tonight* during which the actor stated that



CRYTSAL HEAD VODKA

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sceptics would change their minds after he produced scientific data supporting such outlandish claims as seen on the show. Twenty-four years later, Aykroyd has yet to produce such data.[16]

Aykroyd attempted to get his UFO message across to the public with a new SciFi Channel TV show. The eight-part series, to be called *Dan Aykroyd's Out There*, featured high-profile ufological names like John Mack, Steven Greer and Linda Moulton Howe. In 2002, Aykroyd was standing on New York's 42nd Street talking on the phone to Britney Spears, who wanted advice about the *SNL* episode on which she was appearing. He noticed a tall man in a black SUV giving him a "dirty look". Two hours later, he received word that the SciFi Channel would not air his show, despite many episodes already being filmed. He took the tall figure to be a "Man in Black". Men in Black, of course, are those mysterious people known for silencing people who want to tell the truth about UFOs (**FT250:29, 251:30-31, 341:24, 342:29**).[17]

FAMILIAL SPIRIT

Both Peter Aykroyds have now passed on: the father who wrote *A History of Ghosts* and the son who co-created *Psi Factor*. This leaves Dan to carry on the paranormal family tradition. When Peter died in late 2021, Dan took to Twitter to announce that he was celebrating his brother's life by cracking open a Crystal Head.[18]

Keeping with family tradition, Aykroyd is passing on his belief in the afterworld. A viewing of the *Ghostbusters* movies caused Aykroyd's two oldest daughters to ask if their father believed in ghosts. When he replied in the affirmative, the children were surprised, expecting him to say that *Ghostbusters* was "just a movie". "What's funny," the actor noted, "is their wide-eyed response." The kids were spurred on to learn more about the subject, which Aykroyd felt would serve them well: "They will be equipped for some of the revelations that we're about to, uh, see in the new millennium". He didn't specify what changes he was expecting. Was he thinking of the Mayan calendar? UFO revelations?

Does Aykroyd really believe all this paranormal stuff? He has said he likes Spiritualism because "I think it's entertaining," and has described his father's lifelong séance sessions as "like a show". But is the paranormal anything more to him than just entertainment? In 1999, speaking about ghosts from LA's House of Blues, he elaborated: "Even if they're not real, they're very real in our culture, in our folklore. They're as real as fairies were 100 years ago. You know, today aliens have replaced fairies… and everyone knows about Roswell. Whether it happened or not, or whether this is going on or not, it is part of our folklore and I find that interesting from a sociological standpoint."

During the same interview, Aykroyd offered an explanation for the existence of spirits: "It's all explainable within the realm of physics… There's really nothing that can't be explained… you can even grasp the reality of ghosts if you think about molecules and hydrogen in the air and how it's all composed of molecules and the ether and the air around us really has a substance and it's all moving. You have atoms, which make up everything in nature. You have a nucleus and you have particles rotating around that nucleus. Well, what's in between? There's space in between. That, and I think the space in between a nucleus and an electron is as infinite as the space out there. So, think in those terms you know, I think anything is possible. It can all transmute and change… To understand spirits and phantasms you have to take into account the Big Bang, what people are saying about parallel dimensions, and uh… I encourage people to keep reading and keep an open mind."[19]

However silly the *Ghostbusters* franchise might be, a *Parade* magazine special claims that the movie's popularity as a comedy is secondary and that "the film's biggest contribution to modern culture is that it sparked considerable interest in paranormal investigation, leading to today's new breed of ghostbusters seen on reality shows like *Ghost Hunters* and *Most Haunted*."[20]

If so, Aykroyd seems to have fulfilled his mission to embed paranormal "science" into popular culture.

➾ **BRETT TAYLOR** is the author of poetry collection *Old Roads* (Red Moon Press, 2021) and *The Burning Typewriter*, a new study of authors in the movies from BearManor Media. He'll believe in anything, so long as there's a steady paycheck.

NOTES

1 Gaia Staff, "Dan Aykroyd's Unplugged on UFOs Shows Actors Belief in Phenomenon", 26 Nov 2019. www.gaia.com/article/dan-aykroyd-unplugged-on-ufos.

2 *The Joe Rogan Experience*, 12 Sept 2019.

3 *Q TV*, 20 Jan 2010. www.youtube.com/watch?v=HzX97o86wu8.

4 Jeff Hill and Doug Weingrad, *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of Saturday Night Live*, William Morrow, 1985.

5 "Dan Aykroyd" in *Haunted Hollywood*, Athlon Sports Communications, Inc., 2018.

6 *Late Night with Conan O'Brian*, 8 July, 2005. www.youtube.com/watch?v=1inQjKWpZB4. Nick de Semlyen's 2019 book *Wild and Crazy Guys: How the Comedy Mavericks of the 80s Changed Comedy Forever* wrongly attributes the wording of this quote to David Sheff's August 1993 interview with Aykroyd for *Playboy*. Actually, in the earlier *Playboy* interview, conducted on the set of *Coneheads*, Aykroyd clarified his thinking: "I didn't hop up. I wiggled my rump right up next to it. I thought, If you can like me this much, you're going to feel me right next to you". Also, the ghost wasn't encountered only in bed. This was at least the third ghost seen by Aykroyd's supposedly sceptical mother. Two maids saw it, the first being so frightened she wouldn't go upstairs. A psychic told Aykroyd and Dixon that the ghost belonged to a man who'd died of a drug overdose in the living room. The matter was "hushed up". One wonders if someone really overdosed there: considering all the wild partying that went on in the house on Woodrow Wilson Drive, it wouldn't be all that surprising. The mansion previously belonged to Ringo Starr and Harry Nilsson, not to mention "Mama" Cass, friend of Manson-associated drug dealers like Pic Dawson and Billy Doyle. If someone was actually buried there, as Aykroyd once suggested, perhaps a future owner will someday take it on themselves to excavate the evidence. The house currently belongs to Beverly D'Angelo. When Aykroyd told the story on *The Joe Rogan Experience*, he seemingly referenced a *third* ghost: "My daughter saw him walking down the hall with a little redheaded girl once."

7 Aykroyd's "trance" state certainly sounds like he was drifting to sleep, but he insisted to Conan O'Brien: "Psychologists may discount this and say, Well, you were asleep, you were dreaming. But I know what state I was in."

8 "Who You Gonna Call? A Ghostbusters Retrospective", featurette, Sony *Ghostbusters 1 & 2* Blu Ray, 2014.

9 Spencer Althouse, "24 Fun Facts You Never Knew About 'Ghostbusters". *BuzzFeed*, 15 Aug 2013.

10 DVD Commentary, *Ghostbusters* 2005 DVD, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment Inc.

11 "Cast and Crew" featurette," 1999, *Ghostbusters* 2005 DVD, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment Inc.

12 Staff, op. cit.

13 *Larry King Now*, 20 May 2013. www.youtube.com/watch?v=4V4V_LBnS-g

14 "Dan Aykroyd Has Seen UFOs In Person", *Build Series*. 13 Dec 2017. www.youtube.com/watch?v=kzpxHrQcwFk.

15 Staff, op. cit

16 "Nye, Aykroyd Receive Council's First Awards", *Skeptical Inquirer*, May 1997.

17 Staff, op. cit.

18 Dan Aykroyd Twitter page, 22 Nov 2021. Dan's Twitter handle is @dan_Aykroyd.

19 "Cast and Crew Featurette," 1999, Directed by Alita Renée Holly. *Ghostbusters* 2005 DVD, Sony Pictures Home Entertainment Inc.

20 "Dan Aykroyd" in *Haunted Hollywood*, Athlon Sports Communications, Inc., 2018.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE LIRPA LOOF

In April 1984, BBC1's popular magazine show *That's Life* pulled off one of the greatest TV April Fool jokes of all time – convincing millions of viewers that London Zoo had taken delivery of a hitherto-unseen and rather oddly-behaved Himalayan animal called the Lirpa Loof. Forty years on, **BOB FISCHER** tells the full story for the first time, speaking to zoo employees DR BRIAN BERTRAM and DR JOHN KNIGHT, TV director MARTIN O'COLLINS, *That's Life* presenter BILL BUCKLEY... and to DAME ESTHER RANTZEN herself.

It's 1 April 1984, and lead presenter Esther Rantzen is introducing the closing segment of BBC1's Sunday night magazine programme, *That's Life*.

"The Lirpa Loof..." she begins, as the studio audience listen attentively. "The little Tibetan animal with a talent for mimicking other animals. We read about him when he came to London Zoo six months ago, when the Chinese gave him to us. But this week he has actually been on show there, for the first time since he was allowed out of quarantine..."

As usual, the show that evening has effortlessly combined serious reportage with splendidly light-hearted fare. It has looked at the difficulties faced by disabled people in applying for the government's mobility allowance; it has also taken to the streets to offer hedgehog-flavoured crisps to unsuspecting members of the London public. Only two minutes earlier, co-presenter Bill Buckley has sung a version of 'Underneath The Arches' with a disco-dancing pensioner called George. However, there has been little to suggest that the final 10 minutes of the programme will be devoted to one of the greatest and most elaborate cryptozoological hoaxes in TV history.

Reporter Gavin Campbell has been despatched to London Zoo. In a pre-filmed location report, we see him spending an extraordinary day with the Lirpa Loof itself. And the nature of the beast? Well, it appears to be a creature previously unseen on British TV. Or, indeed, anywhere else. It's a hairy, pot-bellied biped standing around four feet tall – although, on our first sighting, it is sedated on a table, undergoing a medical examination from a team of furrowed-browed vets. The report throughout is played with admirably straight faces, and only closer inspection of the creature's name gives the slightest hint that more mischievous forces are at work. It does, of course, read 'April Fool' backwards.

AS USUAL, THE SHOW THAT EVENING COMBINED SERIOUS REPORTAGE WITH SPLENDIDLY LIGHT-HEARTED FARE

LEFT: Esther Rantzen prepares viewers for their first glimpse of the Lirpa Loof. **BELOW:** London Zoo's Brian Bertram, seen here in the mid-1980s, came up with the idea for the prank.

THE LIRPA LOOF IS BORN

The initial idea for this gloriously ripe prank came, unexpectedly, from London Zoo itself: namely the zoo's Curator Of Mammals, Dr Brian Bertram. Forty years on, Brian is happily retired and living in Gloucestershire, and he gleefully recalls how the idea arrived from nowhere on a morning journey into work.

"I had an hour's commute on the train," remembers Brian. "And I don't know what brought the idea of the Lirpa Loof to mind, but I know the joke started out being quite small – I just thought it would be nice to put a spoof sign up in the zoo, on an empty enclosure. But our press officer Joan Crammond worked absolute wonders, and she contacted Esther Rantzen with the idea."

From here, the story is picked up by Esther herself – now, of course, Dame Esther Rantzen after being decorated in the 2015 New Year Honours.

"We had a tradition on *That's Life,*" explains Esther. "When the programme transmitted on April 1st, which it did three times, we paid no attention to the insane rule about not pranking anyone after mid-day. Because it's nonsense – look at *Panorama* and the spaghetti harvest! [**FT352:28-33**] Our first April Fool's joke [in 1979] was a driving dog, and it went really well – we got thousands of complaints from people who said we were a danger, allowing a dog to drive. Which pleased us enormously! And, as Sunday 1 April came towards us once again, we had a phone call from London Zoo. I actually went to see them to discuss it, and I remember meeting very senior curators while they explained the idea. My family have always been great fans of the zoo, and I think my grandmother and grandfather were among its first 'fellows' –

ABOVE LEFT: George Callard with the Lirpa Loof. **ABOVE RIGHT:** The Lirpa Loof entertains bemused visitors to London Zoo. **BELOW:** (Clockwise from top left): Dr John Knight; *That's Life* co-presenter Bill Buckley in 1984; *That's Life* director Martin O'Collins in 1984; the enigmatic 'Mr Zhou'.

supporters of the zoo.

"So London Zoo came up with the idea of the Lirpa Loof, then we went to work creatively on it."

MEET THE EXPERTS

The location segment was directed by Martin O'Collins, whose BBC career to date had been largely concerned with filming reports for news and current affairs output.

"Esther and I had a conversation and she told me what she wanted," remembers Martin. "And then I went away and commissioned somebody to make the Lirpa Loof costume. If I remember rightly, I went to see a company called Imagineering in Oxfordshire – they had worked a lot on *Doctor Who*, which I think was why the BBC put me in touch with them.

"When I went back to see what kind of progress they were making, I discovered to my horror that they'd made something that looked great – but the mouth was in a fixed, open position and couldn't be closed. I said 'Look, if the mouth is permanently open, it's going to be unbelievable!' But they persuaded me it was too expensive to redesign, so I had to go with it. And when we started filming at London Zoo, the message I got from Esther in the cutting room was 'Why doesn't its mouth shut?'"

This slack-jawed visage is, nevertheless, perfect for our first glimpse of the Lirpa Loof. Heavily sedated and prostrate, the animal is wheeled on a trolley into a medical chamber for an examination by a veterinary team led by Dr John Knight. "Let's have a little look at this chap – at least we think it's a chap!" quips John, giving the Lirpa Loof's teeth and nether regions a thorough inspection before concluding that we are indeed dealing with an "old-ish male".

"In 1984, I was doing most of the clinical work for London Zoo," remembers John, now based in Guernsey and still a practising vet. "At the same time, I was working with the WWF, setting up the Giant Panda breeding programme at Wolong in China. When an animal first comes into the zoo, it gets a veterinary check and then is put into quarantine – so all those elements were correct. But I added a few things to the story: blood samples being taken, and also having our Chinese colleagues with us. I'd met several Chinese vets in Wolong, and I'd brought a couple of them over to London to study. So I was able to ask if they'd like to join in and be experts on the Lirpa Loof."

Among their number is the enigmatic 'Mr Zhou', a youthful-looking Chinese vet interviewed on camera by Gavin Campbell. He convincingly claims the Lirpa Loof was captured "Three years ago… a hunter trapped the animal. There are only two males: one in Chengdu zoo, and another here. We tried to reproduce them, to catch another female animal, but it's not easy."

"Dr Zhou was a young vet working on the Giant Panda breeding programme," smiles John. "And he was very keen – he threw himself into it."

Medical examination concluded, we finally see the Lirpa Loof on his feet.

Here, the contributions of the actor inside that furry costume become a joyous part of the deception. Playing the part of the Lirpa Loof is the legendary Kenny Baker, fresh from his appearances as lovable robot R2D2 in the original *Star Wars* trilogy. His casting was secured by Martin O'Collins.

"Kenny was a very obvious choice," says Martin. "And he was terrific – he was in that costume for a ridiculous amount of time. It got to the stage, at the end of the day, when he said 'I'm not getting in it any more!'. But he'd absolutely given it his all, and I remember Esther telling him afterwards how wonderful she thought he'd been."

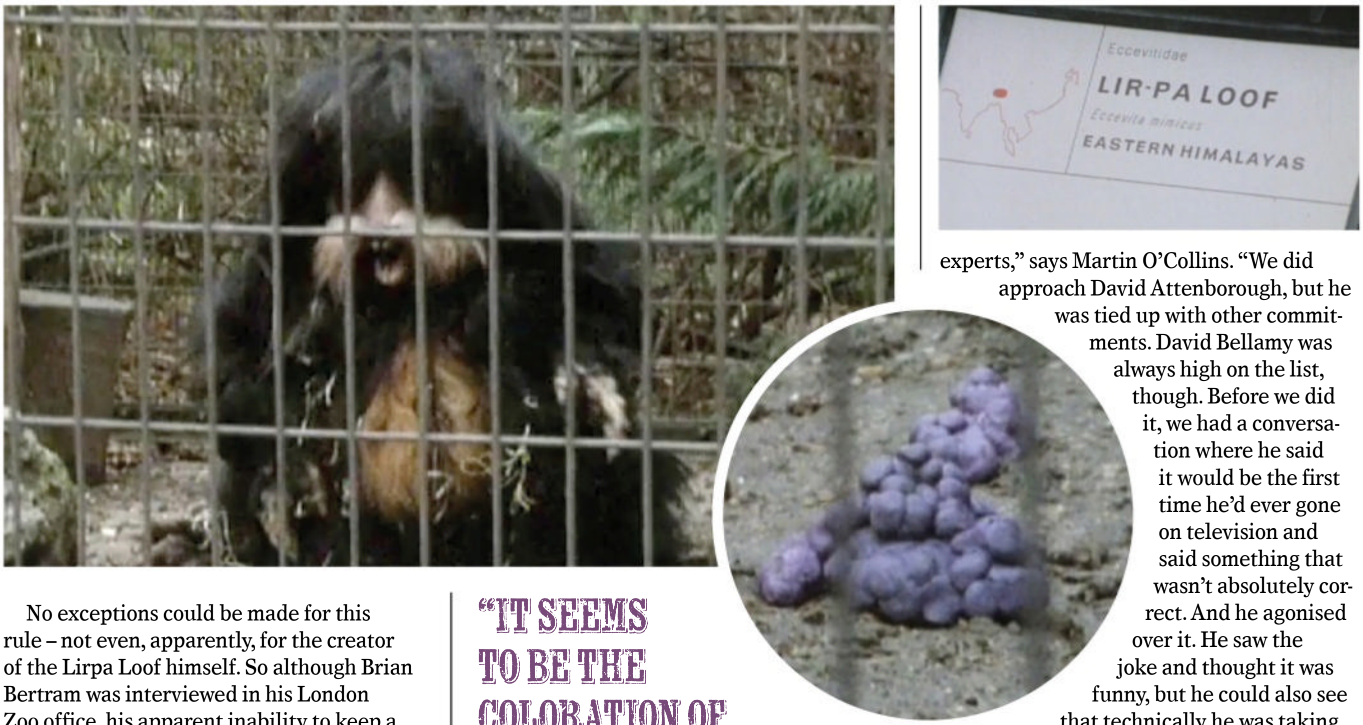
Now conscious, the Lirpa Loof is transferred to a private enclosure and forms an irresistible double act with another esteemed member of the London Zoo team: veteran zookeeper George Callard. "I've been here a few years, longer than I care to remember, and I heard of these all those years ago," fibs George. "I've always wanted to see one, and now we've got one." The Lirpa Loof mimics George's actions to hilarious effect. He bobs up and down, and even sweeps the floor with a broom. "Don't get naughty now, there's a good lad…" smiles the genial zookeeper.

"George was head of the monkey area," explains John Knight. "That's where we kept the Giant Pandas, so to some extent it was fairly logical that the Lirpa Loof would go in there. And the positioning of the monkey house was quite convenient for people coming through the front gate. From a filming point of view, it meant you were likely to have the footfall you needed – nobody was pushed that way, it all happened very naturally."

PLAYING IT STRAIGHT

What is striking throughout the report is the deadpan nature of the interviews. George Callard, John Knight and Dr Zhou all play their parts with impeccable poker faces, as does reporter Gavin Campbell. For Esther Rantzen, taking the comedy seriously was an essential part of her programme's ethos.

"We had an absolute rule on *That's Life*," recalls Esther. "Which was that we mustn't think things are funny ourselves. We always played it straight-faced."



No exceptions could be made for this rule – not even, apparently, for the creator of the Lirpa Loof himself. So although Brian Bertram was interviewed in his London Zoo office, his apparent inability to keep a straight face meant he was left on the cutting room floor.

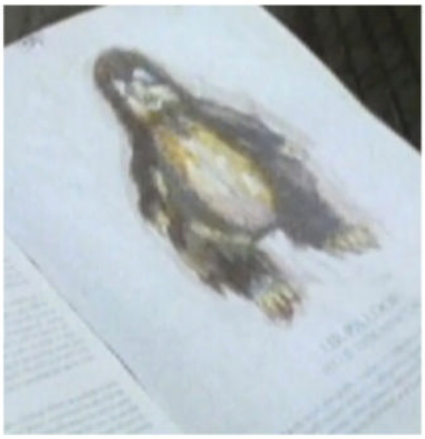
"I always have a smiley face!" protests Brian. "It's just my normal expression. So it may have been just a nice way of them saying 'We didn't think you were interesting enough'."

"I apologise to Brian," smiles Esther. "But we were adamant on *That's Life* – you don't laugh at the jokes, ever. I was involved in the edit of the Lirpa Loof, so I saw it many times before it reached its peak of perfection!"

Wheeled in a cage by George Callard past an interested-looking elephant, the Lirpa Loof is finally allowed into an outdoor enclosure, on which is mounted the convincing information sign suggested by Brian Bertram. The Lirpa's Latin name? *Eccevita mimicus.* 'Eccevita', of course, translating as '*That's Life'*. A crowd of genuine visitors to the zoo quickly gather, and they are soon joined by popular TV naturalist David Bellamy.

"I think we cast around for a few possible experts," says Martin O'Collins. "We did approach David Attenborough, but he was tied up with other commitments. David Bellamy was always high on the list, though. Before we did it, we had a conversation where he said it would be the first time he'd ever gone on television and said something that wasn't absolutely correct. And he agonised over it. He saw the joke and thought it was funny, but he could also see that technically he was taking a little bit of a gamble that might backfire on him."

"IT SEEMS TO BE THE COLORATION OF THOSE RHODODENDRON FLOWERS COMING THROUGH"



Bellamy produces a textbook – the portentous-sounding *Encyclopaedia of Animal Life* – and turns to a page featuring an impressively detailed illustration of the Lirpa Loof. "Ever since I was so high, I've owned this book," he claims. "And here I am for the first time – I've seen it! A live one, here in London. And it has these weird purple droppings, with which it seems to mark its territory. The purple seems to be some of the coloration of those rhododendron flowers perhaps coming through…"

PURPLE POO

This is, quite clearly, an awful lot of backstory. The Himalayan origins? The mimicry? Purple poo from a diet heavy in rhododendron flowers? It's impossible not to wonder where the more fanciful aspects of the Lirpa Loof's character were forged. Brian Bertram genially admits he was the man who placed

TOP: The Lirpa Loof, the sign on the creature's enclosure and its purple droppings, the inevitable result of a diet of rhododendron flowers. **CENTRE:** An illustration of the Lirpa Loof in television naturalist David Bellamy's *Encyclopaedia of Animal Life*. **ABOVE LEFT:** Gavin Campbell interviews David Bellamy while the Lirpa Loof looks on. **ABOVE RIGHT:** Sorry! George Callard, Esther Rantzen and the Lirpa Loof sing a song of apology on the following week's edition of *That's Life*.

this loveable beastie's homeland firmly in the remote mountains of Tibet, but he denies responsibility for any further elaboration. “All I wrote was that the Lirpa Loof was a new animal from the Himalayas,” recalls Brian. “And the reason why I suggested the Himalayas was because ‘Lirpa’ sounded rather like ‘Sherpa’, and I think that word association may have helped unconsciously to give some credibility to the fiction. But the purple poo, and the idea of it mimicking people… that didn't come from me. I never actually envisaged there would be an animal in the enclosure at all. I suspect it was one of the nice creative people on *That's Life* who thought ‘We can make a lot more of this’.” As her colleagues are keen to emphasise, the ultimate ‘nice creative person’ on *That's Life* was Esther Rantzen – the programme's producer as well as its lead presenter.

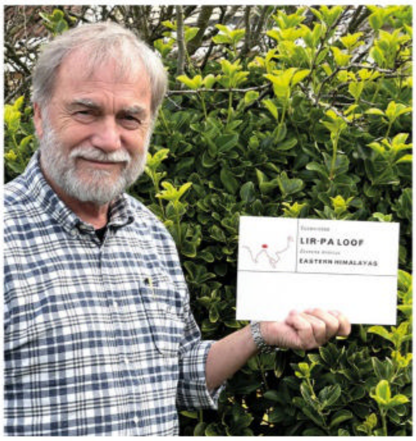
“Yes!” confirms Esther. “It was me who came up with the idea that the peculiarities of the Lirpa Loof should be a) it imitates the zoo's visitors and b) it has purple droppings. And of course BBC Special Effects aren't phased by anything, so being asked for purple droppings was no problem at all.”

The droppings themselves are gloriously realised, visible in a neatly-stacked steaming pile in the Lirpa Loof's enclosure. Much to the hilarity of one giggling young visitor: “Purple shi-!” she exclaims, one hand over her face. Kenny Baker, recalls Martin O'Collins, spent several hours in costume in the enclosure, improvising the Lirpa Loof's reactions to various prompts from unsuspecting members of the public. A party of children encourage the Lirpa Loof to jump up and down and rub its tummy, and a silver-haired American lady makes handwritten notes on a tiny pad, her face frozen in disbelief. “Do you suppose that is what they call the Abominable Snowman?” she asks a passing couple. “It's the most amazing thing I've ever seen in my life.”

FOOLING THE PEOPLE

The studio segments of *That's Life* were recorded before a live audience on the evening of transmission, and their reactions to viewing the Lirpa Loof report are equally fascinating. Bemused – possibly even slightly nervous – giggles build slowly into full-on belly laughs. Presenter Bill Buckley was under no illusion that the audience had quickly caught onto the joke.

“If they'd actually thought it was real, then they might have laughed a little bit at the Lirpa Loof's mimicry,” says Bill. “But I think there would have been more of an awed sound. The fact that they were wetting themselves should maybe have been more of a clue to the audience at home.” Nevertheless, TV viewers were fooled in considerable numbers. “After every show, we would always go out and have a meal,” recalls Martin O'Collins. “And during that meal, Les Wilson the photographer said that he'd been in touch with the BBC and apparently the switchboard was completely jammed. We then heard, during the week, that lots of people were turning up at London Zoo demanding to see the Lirpa Loof – and that they were deeply pissed off when they were told it was an April Fool.”



DR JOHN KNIGHT

LEFT: Dr John Knight in 2024 – proud owner of the original Lirpa Loof sign. **BELOW:** Dame Esther Rantzen today.

“Lots of people came on spec to see the Lirpa Loof,” confirms John Knight. “And some were upset because they'd brought busloads of kids! There were a couple of cases like that. We also had lots of enquiries about where people could buy the wonderful book that David Bellamy had.”

Brian Bertram, meanwhile, remembers a couple of specific complaints. “There was a grumpy letter from one chap to the zoo's director, saying he'd made the journey all the way down to see this animal,” he says. “And there was another rather snooty letter saying that the zoo was meant to be a respectable, reputable scientific institution, and that we shouldn't be doing silly, frivolous things like this.”

Bill Buckley similarly recalls angry callers contacting *That's Life*'s production office – where the phones were frequently answered by the presenters themselves.

“The office was shut on Mondays, because Sunday was our big working day,” recalls Bill. “But on the Tuesday, I remember there were a few calls from people who – the day before – had been to London Zoo to see the Lirpa Loof. There was one teacher who had taken an entire class to see it, and they were not best pleased! How could anybody think that ‘Lirpa Loof’ was a real name? I thought it was very obviously a light-hearted joke. But sure enough, some people clever enough to qualify as schoolteachers did actually believe us.”

PA IMAGES / ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

POSTSCRIPT

The Lirpa Loof's story was not over. On Sunday 8 April, the next edition of *That's Life* ended with a twinkly-eyed apology from Esther Rantzen.

“We have a confession to make,” she tells viewers. “This week, we've had all these letters [she lifts up a bulging folder of correspondence]… most of them from Lirpa fans who want to see our film again. Some of them from furious people who made special trips, took time off, travelled hundreds of miles to visit London Zoo and found the Lirpa had strangely disappeared. The zoo had 1,000 calls this week, and even the Natural History Museum had 100 calls…”

She then welcomes George Callard into the studio – along with, to the audience's delight, the Lirpa Loof himself. Together, Esther and George perform a wistful song of regret, with the Lirpa swaying happily along:

“If we told a lie
If we made you sigh
Lirpa Loof and I
We're sorry
From the bottom of our hearts, dear
We apologise”

Forty years on, is Dame Esther Rantzen surprised that so many people were taken in? “Certainly not!” she exclaims. “We'd polished our skills in this area with our driving dog. And then a few years afterwards, London Zoo were involved again, in our third April Fool. We invented a really effective skin cream called Dorian, made from rhinoceros spit. Its unique property was to remove all the wrinkles from your face, but unfortunately it transferred them to your bum! We filmed an enormous lorry drawing up at London Zoo to collect the latest consignment… and we filmed the rhinoceros itself, but sadly it didn't spit. So one of our film directors went to the dub, and made the most disgusting spitting noises I've ever heard in my life. Edwina Currie was in that film, saying how concerned she was. And that she would tell the Prime Minister!” All who have contributed are keen to point out their joy at having worked with Dame Esther and her enormous contributions to the show's legacy.

“The overriding creative genius behind the show was always Esther,” says Bill Buckley. “She wrote every word you ever heard on the programme, and cut every piece of film you ever saw. My goodness, she was a producer and then some. She was always first in, and always last out – she was incredible”.

And after four decades, does Dame Esther's apology still stand? “No remorse,” she smiles. An opinion the Lirpa Loof, drawing on the full extent of his mimicry skills, would doubtless echo with great aplomb.

Heartfelt thanks to Dame Esther Rantzen, Bill Buckley, Martin O'Collins, Dr John Knight and Dr Brian Bertram. And to Andrew T Smith, Richard Latto and Mark Braxton for further help and encouragement.

BOB FISCHER is FT's regular ‘Haunted Generation’ correspondent, morbidly fascinated by the stranger corners of late 20th century pop culture. You can find him scribbling at www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk or writing audio plays for www.mulgraveaudio.

CONTINUING HIS SERIES OF INTERVIEWS WITH PROMINENT FORTEAN FIGURES, **GORDON RUTTER** TALKS TO MONSTER STATISTICIAN

CHARLES PAXTON

LEFT: Charles as the *Creature from the Black Lagoon* on the shore of Loch Ness.

GORDON RUTTER

Charles Paxton is a research fellow at St Andrews University. His academic pathway is a pretty standard one, as he says "My first degree was in zoology (Liverpool) and then I did a doctorate (Oxford) in fish behaviour because my interest is really fish biology and ecology. I did some postdoctoral research looking at fish ecology and to do that work properly I wanted to use statistics to make sure that I reached well justified conclusions – so I took an interest in statistics, and now I've ended up working in the school of mathematics and statistics at the University of St Andrews." With that background, he says, "I would actually describe myself as a statistical ecologist in that I'm an ecologist who uses statistics rather than a statistician who is interested in ecology. Statistics is a means to an end – it's not an end in itself".

And just before you start reading something else for fear that this is going to turn into a maths lesson, don't panic! Charles is a fortean, and as such puts his mathematical skills to good use.

SEA SERPENTS AND STATISTICS

When I asked about his interest in the world of forteana, he told me: "I've always said, like many people I suspect, that I had a boyish enthusiasm for strange things. I guess, because of my biological interests, that my strongest interest was always in accounts of potentially plausible biological type monsters: sea serpents, giant squid, things like that. I'm interested to a lesser extent in other fortean phenomena, but that's always been my major interest."

So is he a fortean or a cryptozoologist?

"I think I'm probably both really. I'm a fortean in the sense that I thought I'd like to be data-driven in where I go to – my conclusions are open, but I follow where the data takes me – so if that's fortean, then I am one. Whether I'm a cryptozoologist in the modern sense of taking an interest in all manner of paranormal entities that people report and which don't necessarily have any kind of zoological basis at all… probably not. I could be, I suppose, described as a cryptozoologist in the Heuvelmans sense of people reporting strange experiences and looking at whether there could be a zoological basis to that."

How long had he been interested in weird stuff, I wondered?

"I've been doing it formally as a scientist since 1997 or so, so just over 26 years now. And before that I just read about things and was just kind of interested. I mean I've bought copies of *Fortean Times* for years. I was first introduced to *FT* when I worked at the Natural History Museum by some of the curators of fish biology. I think I must have been buying it in the late 1980s.

And so in 1997, at the tail end of my PhD, was the first time I was looking at the rate of discovery for large marine animals and realising that the basic premise of cryptozoology, in the marine context, could be shown: have we discovered everything there is to be discovered? And if you look at the rate at which we're discovering new animals and the cumulative number of animals we have described, if we have discovered everything, then the cumulative number of species described through time should slowly build up from when we first started describing animals and then go up and up and up; and then it should start to level off – if we had captured everything – and it should be flatlining. It does not flatline, and even since that date in 1998, and though several new species of large marine animal have been described, it still hasn't. So this argument, with some people seeming to believe that there are no large animals awaiting discovery by scientists, is wrong."

As a fellow science geek, I ask him if it is now close to flatlining…

"I think it's closer to flatlining, but I haven't looked for a few years now. I still think there's a possibility of finding new large animals greater than two metres long in the main trunk of the body, so we're not talking small animals – or even talking small animals with long flailing tentacles or whatever – we're talking big, chunky animals."

At this point, I made a mistake. I asked Charles if he had a feeling for a number?

"Well as a statistician I don't have feelings for numbers, only estimates of numbers".

I was allowed to rephrase the question. I was paying for the drinks after all. I came up with: "Do you have an estimate, with acceptable error bars and levels of confidence, for the figure of animals remaining to be discovered?"

"No, I don't currently, and in the 1998 paper I wasn't the statistical sophisticate I am now and I didn't actually produce confidence intervals, partially because for this sort of analysis they're quite difficult to construct. I've got a Masters student looking and perhaps we'll be in a position where we can put formal estimates on it. There's a little bit of uncertainty, but it would be single figures, not double digits, if we continue working on the basis of sampling in the same way we've sampled for the last 200 years – which would be surface waters. All bets are off if you start saying what could be crawling along down there – the deep sea benthos – because that's a different story. But then there are other ecological arguments we can infer about that, so large animals in the abyssal plain are a possibility. Cthulhu, if he is still there – let's hope he's a giant squid with a mantle length greater than three metres – then he will be discovered."

ANOMALIES AND CATEGORIES

Charles mentioned he had general fortean interests. I asked if his approach had been applied to non- cryptozoological areas?

"Not yet. I'd like to, though, because many of these principles could be applied to eyewitness testimony for ghosts or UFOs, and we can test hypotheses."

An obvious question – why hasn't he tried this?

"Well, I've got plenty of work to do on sea monsters, so that's the major reason. I also have to do the tedious process, which is tabulating all of the eyewitness testimony into a big spreadsheet. Maybe with artificial intelligence we can speed up that process. You might think at first it's quite fun going through reports of anomalies and coding them up, but I can tell you that after a while it does become a little tedious. The other thing is that you find that after you've set up categories to classify reports, you then find that one in every 100 reports requires you to set up *new* categories… and then, sometimes, you need to go back and re-classify things. You have to do that, so it's quite an intensive process. I've got a database of in excess of 4,500 reports now."

Is Loch Ness the single biggest source of data?

"Yes, but it's just under half. The next biggest ones are Cadborosaurus (Caddy), Lake Champlain, but also New England – the New England sea serpent flap of 1817 to 1822."

As forteans, we are used to this sort of thing, but what do Charles's academic colleagues make of it all?

GORDON RUTTER

"AT FIRST PEOPLE THINK IT'S PRETTY ECCENTRIC, BUT ONCE I DESCRIBE WHAT I ACTUALLY DO THEY THINK IT'S QUITE RESPECTABLE"

"At first, they think it's pretty eccentric, but I think once I describe what I actually do they think it's quite respectable. I think people's hackles are initially raised when I talk about it, but once I get across what I'm actually doing, people are OK with that".

As a statistician, Charles was looking at observations rather than monsters, wasn't he?

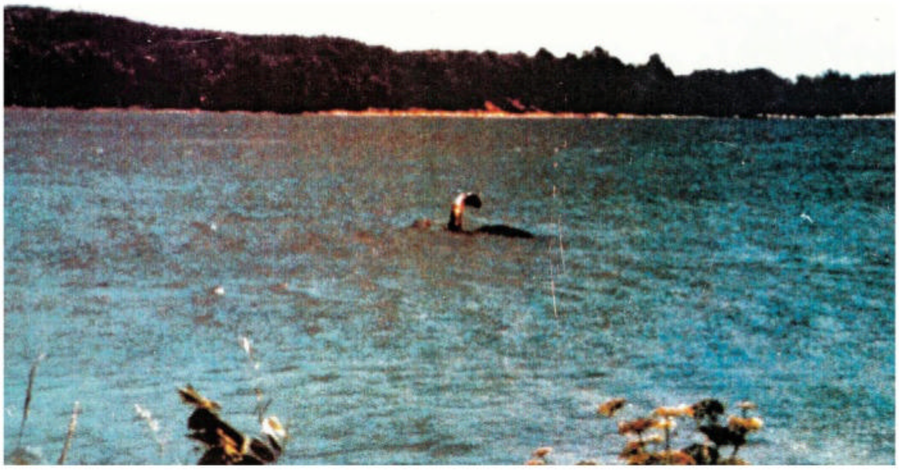
"Yes. I've written a number of articles on this, but some of the problems of anecdotes as scientific data can be avoided if you're very, very careful about how you handle them – and, most specifically, careful about what statistical population you're making conclusions about. So statisticians and scientists take a sample, and then from that sample we make conclusions about a wider population. That doesn't mean population in a kind of demographic sense – like the population of the United Kingdom. It could be a population of cows and you then make a wider conclusion about cows. In my case, I might collect together reports of the Loch Ness Monster, and then I am making conclusions about the wider body: I'm making conclusions about the population of Loch Ness Monster *reports*. I recognise that my conclusions apply to the reported phenomenon and not to the thing that everybody thinks they see. Then I can make scientifically rigorous conclusions."

Nowadays, we can't all be pursuing the work we are interested in and have to think of the long-term picture. I wondered if any of this had had a negative impact on Charles's career.

"No, it's been in a positive way, in the sense that I may be interested in what's the best way of thinking about problems in evidence-based research. It's been really helpful – like the parapsychology approach, where to be able to show *anything* they have to prove that they are whiter than white. So if you get formal academic parapsychologists, their experimental design is like the best you can do, because they need to have experimental design that can't be interpreted in any other way than the particular thing they want to test; and so if you do parapsychology properly, as the Edinburgh group do, then you're actually super good at doing high quality experimental design. I don't do experiments other than to do observation studies, but it does require, because of the extra scrutiny any results I get will have, to be squeaky clean in terms of procedures and this sort of thing".

I had to ask if Charles had done specifically fortean observational studies.

"Yes, actually – with you! We did a really



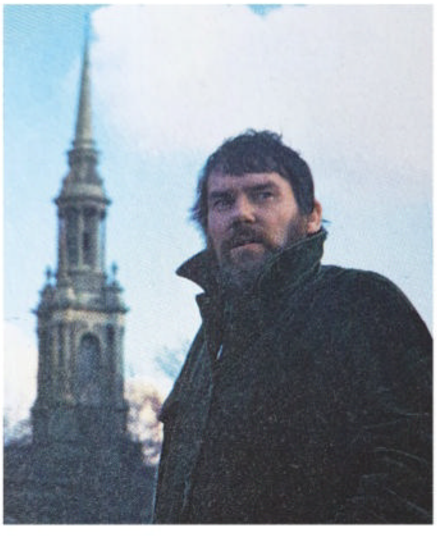
TOP: Charles at Loch Ness toasting Nessie's 80th birthday in 2013. **ABOVE**: Not just Nessie: Charles also draws on data associated with other monster sightings, such as 'Champ', seen here in the 1977 'Mansi photo'.

GREAT CORBY BREWHOUSE
SMALL BATCH BREWED
EACHY OF BASSENTHWAITE

MICHAEL WALSH / CREATIVE COMMONS

LEFT: Bassenthwaite in the LAke District: definitely not home to a monster, although it is now celebrated in a local brew. **BELOW:** The late Frank Smyth, inventor of Wapping's 'Phantom Vicar of Ratcliff Wharf''.

> "YES, YOU CAN PUT FALSE FACTS OUT THERE. THAT HOAX LASTED FOR OVER 13 YEARS BEFORE SOMEONE REALISED THERE WAS NO EVIDENCE"



DAVID SUTTON

fun experiment at the Edinburgh Botanic Garden where we got people to look at a person in a gorilla costume in an environment which approximately mimicked the Pacific Northwest. We got them to observe Bigfoot moving through a forest and then report what they saw… and also we got people in the same environment and then said: 'Can you imagine reporting a Bigfoot sighting?' We were interested in what the differences between those two sets of results actually were. And there were differences, but obviously it's unpublished and as a responsible scientist I can't tell you the results; but they were interesting results and we do intend to get them published."

I knew Charles had done more, so pushed him on this.

"Another test I did was at Windermere, where I put a model monster out and I got people to look at it. I knew what its dimensions were and how far away it was from the observers. I wanted to get a feel for how good people were at estimating distances over water. Again, I've not published that data; but, again, they're interesting results. People are pretty good, but they're not perfect at estimating distances, heights and lengths."

INVENTED VICARS AND FAKE MONSTERS

I also remembered there was something specifically to do with Wikipedia, so what was that?

"I was very interested to discover that in the early 1970s, people were reporting a phantom vicar in Wapping. It was reported on in *Man, Myth and Magic*. People had been reporting a phantom vicar in Wapping who was meant to have been an historical character from the 18th century who had done some foul deeds.[1] It turns out that there never was a phantom vicar of Wapping and this was an experiment by the reporter to see if people would generate false accounts. There is a *Sunday Times* article where Frank Smyth explains the hoax. I wanted to give a 21st century spin to this, so I thought to place a Wikipedia article which claimed there are monsters in two locations where there *wasn't* a monster – Windermere and Bassenthwaite, both in the English Lake District. I wanted to see what would happen if I placed articles on Wikipedia. Would it propagate from there and generate full eyewitness reports? And it did! To the extent that people started producing T-shirts and it appears in some tourism literature in the Lake District. The monster was called 'Eachy', which is actually a pun on the Gaelic name for the water horse. And I made it a humanoid monster, not a serpentine one, as I wanted to make it very distinctive. I didn't actually generate any eyewitness testimony. That was written up in a copy of *Skeptical Inquirer* from 2022.[2] So, yes, you can put false facts out there, and that hoax lasted for over 13 years before someone realised there was no evidence. So the moral of the story is: don't necessarily trust what you read online, but be critical. I mean that's probably the story of my cryptozoological and fortean research – be critical, consider the evidence."

To bring our talk to a conclusion I asked if Charles had ever encountered any problems with this line of work.

"One problem I wasn't anticipating is that studies of fortean topics, by their very nature, are quite distinctly interdisciplinary. Nature journals find it difficult to cope with this. It's difficult to find journals who will take the material. It's not an academic resistance to investigating weird stuff, because in a sense many people do that, but it's academic resistance to interdisciplinarity. The very narrow structure means your thing does not fit into their hole. One mistake that my work doesn't suffer from, but other people's work in this field might, is that I make no claims as to the underlying reality of what's being reported – and of course as a scientist, you can't, because no matter how you spin it the existence of the Loch Ness Monster and Bigfoot has not been proven. So you never, ever want to start a paper assuming the existence of this or that monster, but of course from my approach, which is to look at the reported phenomena. The existence or not of the supposed underlying cause is rather secondary to trying to understand the nature of the reporting process."

With the potential of a couple of books in the near future and continuing research in sea monsters Charles still has ideas about his retirement – he wants to use the same techniques on ghost and UFO reports. So we'll have to wait a few years for that, unless of course there is a rich benefactor out there looking for something to fund…

NOTES

[1] Frank Smyth (uncredited), "The phantom vicar of Ratcliff Wharf", *Man, Myth and Magic* 105,1971, pp.2957-2958.

[2] www.skeptic.org.uk/2022/09/creating-a-monster-the-case-of-eachy-the-wikipedia-monster-of-bassenthwaite/

Darkness at noon

TED HARRISON monitors eschatological reactions in the US to April's upcoming solar eclipse...

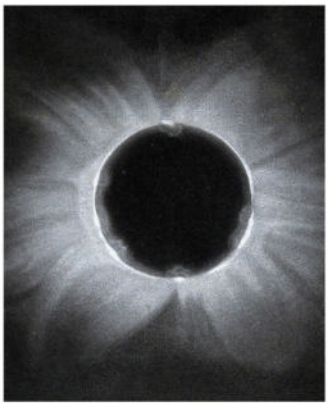
The sun be darkened, and the moon shall not give her light, and the stars shall fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens shall be shaken … and they shall see the Son of man coming in the clouds of heaven with power and great glory.”

American Fundamentalist Christians will be eagerly opening their Bibles at Matthew Chapter 24 as 8 April approaches. While NASA scientists are expecting an unusually long-lasting and spectacular solar eclipse visible right across the United States, millions of Americans are anticipating even more – an event of apocalyptic importance.

Totality, the time when the Sun will be totally obscured by the Moon and daylight will vanish, will last over four minutes.

The April eclipse, says NASA, could be unusually spectacular in that the Sun is near its maximum activity and streamers will likely be visible throughout the corona, the cycle of light around the hidden Sun. Viewers will have a better chance to see prominences – which appear as bright, pink curls or loops coming off the Sun. Some preachers suggest this is what is meant by the biblical prophecy that ‘the stars shall fall from the heavens’.

This comes just seven years after another solar eclipse was seen across the USA. Astronomers say it is a highly unusual astronomical occurrence for two solar eclipses to be visible from the same place on Earth so close in time to each other. On average, if you witnessed an eclipse, you would have to wait another 360 years until you saw another one from the same spot.



“Is it God’s final warning to America? Only time will tell.”

Preachers have noted that this seven-year gap is numerically significant, seven being a religiously symbolic number. For instance The Tribulation, it is written in the Book of Revelation, will last seven years. Noted too is the path across the country that the total eclipse will take, for it crosses the path taken by the 2017 eclipse at a highly significant point: South Illinois, in an area known as Little Egypt. Egypt is mentioned many times in the Bible, both as the place from which the early Israelites escaped by crossing the Red Sea and the place of refuge for the young Jesus when hunted by King Herod. The eclipse on 21 August 2017, it was noted, crossed over seven towns and cities named ‘Salem’, another Biblical reference, this time to the holy city of Jerusalem. The 2024 eclipse crosses seven other places in the USA with a significant Biblical connection: Nineveh – in Texas, Missouri, Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Virginia and New York. It was to Nineveh that the reluctant prophet Jonah was sent by God: “Arise, go to Nineveh, that great city, and cry against it; for their wickedness is come up before me.” Moreover, the eclipse has been interpreted as God’s final warning to America by website endoftheamericandream.com, which also noted the coincidence that an ancient eclipse, known as the Bur-Sagale eclipse of 763 BC, was seen in Nineveh when Jonah was there. The paths taken by the eclipses of 2017 and 2024, if plotted on a map, look like a giant cross being drawn over the USA.

The question being asked by Biblical eschatologists is whether this is just a coincidence, or is it the Lord’s way of alerting America that judgment is on the way?

American author and musician Sand Sheff, who wrote the book *Eclipse Miracle*, has described eclipses as an element in a cosmic story told by a cosmic storyteller, “one that lives outside of time, and maintains a full view of time. Eclipses are perhaps the most profound pattern found in nature that asserts cosmic timekeeping in relation to the history of man. This pattern is quite real. The manifestation of the pattern is sublime, often surprising and bears a distinct similarity to art, and music. The Creator of these patterns is worthy of awe and reverence.”

Sand Sheff quotes on his website from St Luke’s Gospel (21:25) “And there shall be signs in the sun, and in the moon, and in the stars; and upon the earth distress of nations.”

Jonathan Brentner, an American pastor and writer on the Bible and its end-time message, highlights current events in the Middle East as evidence of the distress of nations. “The US President is putting extreme pressure on Israel to give up its pursuit of the Hamas terrorists and agree to a two-state solution, which he says is the only path to peace. The Bible, however, tells us that the Lord will deal harshly with any nation that pursues such a policy that results in the dividing of His Land.”

Writing on the end-time website ‘Rapture Ready’ he adds, “We live in the shadow of the seven-year Tribulation when the entire Earth will experience the fury of God’s wrath. Those who know and believe the words of biblical prophecy recognise the myriad of signs telling us that this time is ever so near. It’s certain that the Lord will bring much destruction to America during this time, but does the upcoming solar eclipse signify the nearness of this time? Is it God’s final warning to America? Only time will tell. We know that the Lord’s wrath will fall on the US; we just don’t know when. It could be this week, next month, this year, or later. We do know that at any moment, Jesus will come for His own, and sudden destruction will fall upon the unsuspecting world.”

The idea that celestial events are portents of earthly doom is not new (see **FT294:27**). There were two eclipses during the reign of Pope Urban VIII, the pope responsible for demanding the scientist and astronomer Galileo renounce his work. Pope Urban feared the 1628 and 1630 eclipses were a sign from heaven that his papacy was doomed. A 1652 solar eclipse in Scotland and Ireland created alarm and was taken as a portent of the Day of Judgment. In 1715, London had not witnessed a solar eclipse for 600 years and as the day approached there was panic that the up-coming ‘Black Day’ was a herald of Doomsday.

Reports of solar eclipses stretch back 4,000 years to records made in ancient China. The ancient Babylonians were able to predict eclipses and noted a cycle of events, now known as a Saros Cycle, of just over 18 years.

Despite the study of eclipses being well grounded in astronomic science, when they occur they are spectacular events. No wonder the ancient Chinese thought that a dragon had devoured the Sun. The fact that they trigger apocalyptic alarm is not surprising, even in modern-day America.

➾ **TED HARRISON** is an artist, writer, film-maker and former BBC religious affairs correspondent.

WELLCOME COLLECTION

Food of the gods

Today, Easter and chocolate are inseparable, but why did an American plant become a European symbol of an Asian religion? LISA GLEDHILL investigates the sacred history of this magical confection.

There is something sublime about chocolate. Every culture that encounters it has recognised this. Even the literal-minded Carl Linnæus poetically named the cacao tree 'Theobroma' – literally, the food of the gods. Was he aware of the plant's sacred status within Mesoamerican cultures or had he just tasted a divine cup of cocoa?

The earliest traces of cacao being processed and used as a food, medicine and ritual offering date back 5,500 years to the Mayo-Chinchipe-Marañón people of Ecuador.[1] Not much is known about this ancient culture of farmers and builders but their cocoa recipe seems to have caught on and it passed up the Pacific coast to the more famous Olmec, Aztec and Maya civilisations. Ecuador is still exporting some of the world's finest chocolate to grateful worshippers across the globe.

In Maya culture, cacao was associated with Ek Chuaj, the god of trade, and cacao seeds – commonly called 'beans' – were used like a currency across Mesoamerica. Drinking it was a costly activity – like making a smoothie from a wad of tenners. The Aztecs made frothy drinks from roasted, ground cacao beans mixed with spices or other flavourings, and used them in worshiping Quetzalcoatl, who brought the cacao tree to humanity. The fruit and seeds had a huge range of medicinal uses, from treating asthma to snake bites,[2] and one source claims the Aztec ruler Moctezuma II drank it as an aphrodisiac.[3] It was generally believed to give you strength, so beans were – and sometimes still are – a popular wedding gift.

ISAI SYMENS / WIKIPEDIA COMMONS

Cacao seeds were used like a currency across Mesoamerica

BROOKLYN MUSEUM / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: Cacao beans. **BELOW LEFT**: An Aztec scultpure of a man carrying a cacao pod (c.1440-1521).

Our information on exactly how these drinks were made and used comes via Europeans who weren't tuned in to the cultural subtleties of the people they were observing, so the details are sometimes vague or contradictory. However it's pretty certain that across Mesoamerica, cacao-based drinks were very special and sacred beverages – and that's as true today as it was 500 years ago. According to American anthropologist Cameron L McNeil: "In those areas where cacao is still used, there is sometimes a continuity with pre-Columbian and early Colonial practices. Ethnographers document the role of cacao in ritual life as an offering not only to ancestors but also to the Chacs (rain gods), the gods of the mountains (sometimes ancestor deities), and the Earth Goddess, as well as to the saints and to Christ, who are often barely disguised representatives of pre-Conquest deities." [4]

Back in the 1500s, the first Europeans who encountered this bitter-tasting, suspiciously-coloured drink were not impressed. The Jesuit writer Jose De Acosta described: "A concoction they make, which they call chocolate. It is a foolish thing that they cherish in that land, and for some who are not used to it, it is disgusting because it's got a foam on top and a spurt [sic] like fæces." [5] That's not a promising introduction, but De Acosta's writing brought the word 'chocolate'[6] to a European audience for the first time.

When the trend for chocolate-drinking took off in Europe, some Catholic churchmen condemned it and debates raged particularly fiercely over whether you could consume it during Lent. On the one hand, a vegetable-based drink that made you feel full was very popular with people who

JOSÉ LUIS FILPO CABANA / CREATIVE COMMONS

ABOVE: Mayan censer lid in the shape of a female cocoa deity holding a vessel with cocoa fruits (c.AD 250-450).

were fasting – and the Jesuits who owned cacao plantations were very much in favour; on the other hand, there was a whiff of something pagan about this exotic delicacy and it was all just a little bit too decadent. It wasn't until the 18th century that Pope Pius VI definitively ruled that chocolate was OK.[7]

Over time the bitter spicy drink evolved into a sweet, solid treat and today, despite the Pope's ruling, chocolate is pretty much top of the list of things people give up for Lent. The idea that chocolate is somehow transgressive or forbidden is embedded in our culture – it even forms the basis of Joanne Harris's international bestseller *Chocolat*, where a free-spirited pagan chocolatier runs up against a restrictive, repressed and hypocritical churchman.

But after Lent comes the magical transubstantiation when chocolate ceases to be sinful and becomes an essential part of the Easter Sunday celebrations. For at least 150 years people have gorged on chocolate while celebrating the resurrection of Christ. Chocolate and chocolate eggs in particular are so intrinsic to the festival that some culture warriors regard any attempts to tamper with them as an attack upon Christianity itself.[8]

So why does chocolate, which is no longer rare or exotic, still have a power and mystique beyond any other tasty or calorie-rich food? Cocoa beans are said to have one of the most complex flavours in the natural world. They contain caffeine and theobromine, which are both psychostimulants, as well as flavonoids which can influence brain-tissue growth and changes in neuron morphology. They also contain anandamides, which bind to the same brain-receptors as cannabis, and serotonin and tryptophan, which affect mood.[9] Chocolate really can give you a bit of a high. Combine all of that with sugar and a delivery-medium which sensually melts in the mouth and you've got a magic formula.

Most of the chocolate you find in the average corner shop today contains relatively small amounts of cocoa and lots of other ingredients. We're also very, very used to eating it, so its effects aren't always obvious. However, there is an experiment you can try to experience a full-on hit of chocolate, even with our over-stimulated modern senses. You wait at least half an hour after eating or drinking so your palette is clear. Then hold your nose and place a piece of high-quality, cocoa-rich chocolate on your tongue – it's very important not to smell any chocolate before you put it in your mouth. Close your eyes, let it melt slowly, release your nose and then exhale and inhale through your mouth and nose together.

I'm told the sudden whack of flavour can be mind-blowing, but unfortunately I can't try it myself. Three years ago I had to give up chocolate because it was giving me migraines, and apparently that's not uncommon. The biogenic amines in cocoa are known to trigger headaches and the caffeine and theobromine alter bloodflow through the brain, which can also be a trigger. However, migraines themselves are a somewhat fortean condition, still not fully understood. The visual distortions, lights, colours and sense of dislocation that may be experienced during severe migraine attacks have much in common with ecstatic states and religious visions. Is this another reason why chocolate is the food of the gods?

NOTES

[1] https://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/6091

[2] Teresa L Dillinger et al, "Food of the Gods: Cure for Humanity? A Cultural History of the Medicinal and Ritual Use of Chocolate", *Journal of Nutrition* Vol. 130, No. 8, Aug 2000, pp. 2057-2027 www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022316622143798#bib29

[3] Bernal Díaz del Castillo, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España* (The True History of the Conquest of New Spain), 1632.

[4] Cameron L McNeil, *Chocolate in Mesoamerica – A Cultural History of Cacao*, Florida University Press, 2006.

[5] Jose De Acosta, *Historia natural y moral de las Indias* (The Natural and Moral History of the Indies), 1590.

[6] "Chocolate" is frequently said to be the Europeanised version of the Nahuatl word "Xocolatl" meaning 'bitter water', but not all etymologists accept this derivation.

[7] Miles Pattenden, "The theology of chocolate", www.historytoday.com/archive/history-matters/theology-chocolate

[8] www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2017/apr/04/easter-eggs-theresa-may-archbishop-christianity

[9] Astrid Nehlig, "The neuroprotective effects of cocoa flavanol and its influence on cognitive performance", https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3575938/

LISA GLEDHILL is a writer, filmmaker and regular contributor to *Fortean Times* with a keen interest in food folklore and history. She's still struggling to come to terms with not being able to eat chocolate.

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A compendium of cryptids

Sue Hardiman finds that an otherwise excellent scholarly exploration of cryptozoology through the lens of cultural anthropology is let down by its artwork

Bigfoot to Mothman

A Global Encyclopaedia of Legendary Beasts and Monsters

Margo DeMello

Bloomsbury Academic 2024

Hb, 320pp, £75, 9781440877254

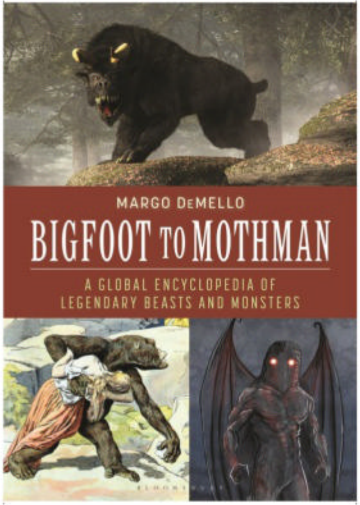
Margo DeMello is a cultural anthropologist, assistant professor of anthrozoology and the author of a number of books. This encyclopædia of cryptids is a scholarly work in which she looks at cryptozoology through the lens of cultural anthropology. It is divided into two sections: the first is an A-Z list of cryptids; the second covers extinct, invented or mythical creatures similar to cryptids. Each of these listings has a mini-bio and date of last sighting as well as suggestions for further reading.

In this work, DeMello states that "the presence of monsters – unknown, unchecked, inscrutable – may be the only thing we have left that reminds us of what once was but can never be again". Cryptids perhaps embody what is unknown and dangerous in a modern world; where science has an explanation for most things and any natural dangers have been overshadowed by those made by man.

She believes that cryptids have a central role to play in the myths and cultures of peoples worldwide. Linked to this, she argues that the relentless search for scientific proof of such creatures ignores the blurring of boundaries between science and nature and ignores the liminal spaces in our world that can trigger a primeval sense of the uncanny in all of us. Hence, her introduction examines the world of cryptozoology and highlights its position on the periphery of accepted scientific thought, and she remarks that those making a study of such creatures are often marginalised and ridiculed.

Throughout the book she makes a number of important and salient points. Firstly, that there is often a wealth of cultural and anecdotal evidence for cryptids which is ignored or dismissed by "science" as there is no physical specimen. This bias often speaks to the lack of respect give to the cultures of native peoples by Western science.

In addition, she considers cryptids as metaphors. One example she cites is the Grootslang observed in South Africa. This snake-like cryptid is allegedly greedy for wealth and riches and this DeMello posits could be a symbol for the white man and his lust for diamonds.



She then considers cryptids as holdovers or relics from the past. She highlights the case of the Mokele-mbembe from the Congo basin (a mythical water beast resembling a diplodocus) and considers why, when cryptozoologists collect multiple stories from indigenous peoples, it would only be the physical discovery of such a creature that would satisfy Western science – although she considers that this would confirm the bias that Africa and her peoples are prehistoric relics also.

> *Cryptids have a central role to play in the myths and cultures of peoples worldwide*

Another dinosaur holdover that DeMello considers is the Thunderbird, a sacred symbol to the Native Americans, which it has been suggested might be a pterosaur – but she points out that this conjecture has been co-opted by some creationists as proof that man and dinosaurs lived at the same time.

One of the most important examples of cryptids as holdovers from the past is that of the Ebu Gogo on Flores Island. The indigenous people of the area had often spoken of a race of diminutive, wild hominids and this is perhaps verified by the discovery of the remains of *Homo floresiensis* in 2003. This is not to say that *Homo floresiensis* survived to the modern day but rather that *Homo sapiens* retained a species memory of them which had been passed down in legend.

DeMello also makes an interesting point about cryptids and warfare. She highlights the case of monsters being seen in the First World War as well as the case of the Batatut from Vietnam. This Yeti/Bigfoot-type creature became better known when tales of such a monster made their way back to America through the soldiers serving in the Vietnam War. A number of combatants reported an ape-like creature throwing rocks at them. DeMello then goes on to reflect that it cannot be hard to imagine such accounts when you factor in the denigration of an enemy into something sub-human. This is sadly part of the horror of war as well as the terrifying and otherworldly situations soldiers find themselves in.

There is a lot to like in this book; as a reference work it is extremely thorough and it has many useful lists and indices, including a full bibliography. At the beginning of the book, cryptids are listed alphabetically by entry, geographically by country, thematically by habitat and taxonomically by type. Furthermore, in the appendices DeMello gives us a useful breakdown of cryptozoology podcasts, TV shows, journals, conventions and academic courses as well as a list of well-known cryptozoologists (although this is alphabetised by first name rather than surname which is less useful). Regrettably, I was not too sure about the artistic depictions of various cryptids that accompany some of the descriptions; I felt they might be better suited to a less academic and scholarly work.

On the whole however, this is an excellent guide to cryptids for those with either a casual or a keen interest in the field. It provides a wealth of material and suggestions for follow-up reading and information. I enjoyed discovering cryptids I'd not heard of previously and many of DeMello's theories on the subject gave me food for thought. One thing that struck me was how many of the cryptids listed are to be found in North America. Is there some cultural explanation? All things considered, I think the world would be a far duller place without the hope of such creatures loitering in the shadows. ★★★★

Under mediæval skin

Ross MacFarlane explores anatomical depictions of the human body in the past

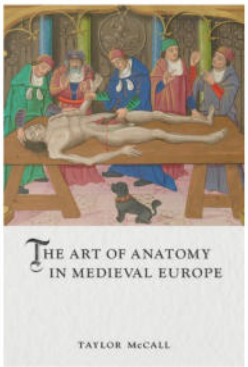
The Art of Anatomy in Mediæval Europe

Taylor McCall

Reaktion Books 2023

Hb, 223pp, £16.95, ISBN 9781789146813

In Thomas Harris's novel *Red Dragon* (1981), a body is discovered with multiple weapons protruding from it, seemingly the latest victim of a serial killer. On investigation, FBI officer Will Graham discovers how the victim was once treated by a Dr Hannibal Lecter. On visiting Lecter's office – and discovering his collection of historical medical textbooks – Graham understands the arrangement of the victim's body to be a recreation of an image of the mediæval period, the so-called "Wound Man".



This referencing of the "Wound Man" – which would again be drawn on in the *Hannibal* TV series (2013-15) – is outside the scope of Taylor McCall's study but it alludes to how historic images of the body can still carry a potent and visceral cultural charge. Harris's use also speaks to the seemingly ever-lingering sense of the "mediæval" as a shorthand for the barbaric and undeveloped. As such, is it any wonder that texts from that time, and images from them, could serve as the inspiration for a fictional serial killer?

The Art of Anatomy in Mediæval Europe makes the case for the intellectual richness of renderings of the interior of the human body during this period, and the precise and detailed meanings inherent in such images. McCall's account shows how Bloodletting and Zodiac figures were visual representations to explain the wider effect of astrology on medical practice. Also, that the Wound Man was not just a visualisation of violence – it was part of a text on the treatment of such injuries.

Like the other entries in Reaktion's "Mediæval Lives" series, McCall's book combines a crisp and concise writing style with cutting-edge scholarship. This is particularly prevalent when laying to rest some long-lasting myths on the topic: for example, dissection was a lot more common in mediæval society than is usually supposed and that there were no religious bans on the practice, whether from Christianity or Islam.

McCall's subtle discussion on the idealised nature of the visual tropes she investigates is one that has wider relevance than just to her time-period. As she points out, many mediæval anatomical images were diagrams rather than natural representations and *any* medical diagram – whether from the present day or the past – involves a subjective choice made by the image's creator. It's this theoretical underpinning, combined with an easy-worn familiarity with the meaning and manufacture of manuscripts, that makes this book such an intellectually rich and satisfying read.

One last detail: the anatomical images McCall discusses have survived in no small part due to the durability of mediæval parchment – so, images of human anatomy are still with us due to being drawn onto the skin of an(other) animal. Perhaps an irony that would have had Dr Lecter raising his eyebrow (or licking his lips).

★★★★

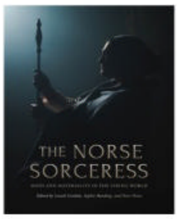
The Norse Sorceress

Mind and Materiality in the Viking World

ed. Lezek Gardeła, Sophie Bønding, Peter Pentz

Oxbow Books 2023

Hb, 515pp, £60, ISBN 9781789259537



"If you don't know what it's for, it must be ritual." It's the oldest archæology joke in the world, and archæologists never tire of hearing it. The problem with this hilarious gag is that quite a lot of archæological deposits, especially in burial contexts, *are* ritual, and these can be quite challenging to interpret. Take the case of "magical" objects in graves from early mediæval Scandinavia: certain patterns of items found in burials, mostly of women, suggest magical or ritual uses, but the meaning of these deposits can be very challenging to interpret. How far do they line up with descriptions of pre-Christian ritual or sorcery in the textual sources, and how far can these sources be relied on, given that they are mostly later in date and written by Christian authors?

These are the questions tackled by the 36 chapters of *The Norse Sorceress*, a collection of articles by a range of scholars focused on exploring magic and ritual in the Viking world. Following in the footsteps of Neil Price's ground-breaking *The Viking Way* (**FT378:64**), this volume focuses on the image of the *völva*, (pl. *völur*), a familiar seeress or sorceress from Old Norse poetry and sagas. Each article covers a different topic, grouped into five sections. Broadly, the first section covers the thought of the period, addressing topics like gender, the role of the *völva*, concepts of magic and more. The second section covers the places where ritual activities took place, while the third deals with the roles of animals in ritual practices. One key point shared between these sections is the idea of the agency of non-human things – animals and even objects were understood to act on the world around them in symbolic or magical ways.

Readers who want to get into the specifics of these burials will find the fourth and fifth sections most interesting. These cover specific burials that have been interpreted as the burials of *völur*, as well as the artefacts found in these burials, including pendants, pins, masks, textiles, miniature weapons and the enigmatic metal "magic staffs" that have become one of the most prominent symbols of a renewed focus on magic in Viking-age archæology over the last 20 years.

This structure makes *The Norse Sorceress* a more interesting read for the non-archæologist. Although much of the writing is still quite technical, beginning with sections that outline relevant context before moving on to deal with specific burials or artefact types makes the book much more accessible to readers interested in ritual or burials but not immersed in the material culture of the Viking world. Each chapter also contains helpful annotations that identify when a concept is discussed in more detail elsewhere in the book, avoiding the lack of interconnectedness that can sometimes be a problem with edited volumes.

Packed with detail and representing up-to-date research on an area where much remains to be done, *The Norse Sorceress* is an absolute must for anyone interested in magic or ritual in the early Middle Ages or in the history of these topics more generally.

James Holloway

★★★★★

High Strangeness

A Lifetime of Alien and Paranormal Experiences

Michael Kameron

Flying Disk Press 2023

Pb, 114pp, £11.50, ISBN 9798393291792

Michael Kameron gives an engaging first-hand account of his lifelong paranormal and alien experiences, that began during childhood in the East End of London in the 1970s.

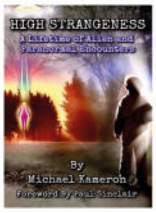
Starting at the age of four, he played and chatted with two imaginary friends, who wore tight-fitting uniforms and had blue eyes and long blonde hair conforming to the Nordic alien stereotype. On one occasion one of them put him into an Oz Factor-like trance.

In the school grounds where his father worked as a caretaker,

Michael and his brother Sean saw a silver, saucer-shaped metallic object in the sky. As it moved in their direction they quickly ran away in fear from the object.

Also with Sean, Michael saw a strange alien grey creature inside the empty school, and as with their previous UFO sighting they entered a trance-like state. On his own Michael saw a Man in Black in their home located near the school, and as he got older on numerous occasions he experienced astral travel and abductions by grey aliens.

Most of us as children are afraid of the dark and might have imaginary friends, but Michael seems to have been hyper-sensitive to anything that he perceived as out of the ordinary. It should be added that many of his experiences sound like examples of sleep paralysis and dissociation.



Throughout the text these experiences are framed in the context of the trappings of ufology, such as MIB, greys, Nordics, abductions and star gates, along with the idea that the phenomena are part of him and run through generations of his family.

Michael believes he is suffering from Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and that the aliens have used psychological warfare on him. In the past or in other contexts his experiences would be considered in a religious light, with Michael being plagued by the forces of Satan. Today, a belief in alien visitors eagerly promoted by ufologists acts as a framework for Michael's torment, but what is really going on? In his teens, when he told his family doctor that he had seen a ghost of his recently deceased father, he was advised to go to an "institution" to receive help. Like others with similar experiences, Michael had to wonder if he was "going crazy". Such branding is reprehensible and we need to take a more balanced and less dogmatic view of high strangeness cases. It's no wonder that faced with such attitudes experiencers seek understanding from anywhere that will accept them.

As a straightforward factual account we get an insight into Michael's early life, that at times does not make easy reading. He promises a second volume, as these experiences still haunt him.

Nigel Watson

★★★★

Invisible Lines

Boundaries and Belts that Define the World

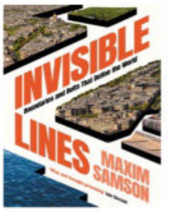
Maxim Sansom

Profile Books 2023

Hb, 404pp, £22 ISBN 9781800814998

Maxim Sansom is a cultural geographer who specialises in the geography of religions and beliefs. This breezy book of 30 short essays on dividing lines, borders and demarcated zones includes fortean-adjacent subjects such as the Bible Belt in the US and the religious zones created by Orthodox Jews, but starts out on a bigger, planetary scale.

There are early essays on the "Wallace Line", drawn by Alfred Russel Wallace between the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean to mark out where evolution diverges between the flora and fauna of Asia and Australia, and on Tornado Alley in the States, and the Malaria Belt in tropical latitudes. For the more culturally constructed borders and zones that organise human meaning on a planetary scale, there are informative essays on the origin of international time zones, a product of having to standardise railway timetables in the 19th century, and the wayward line the International Date Line has to take down the Pacific to minimise confusion among near neighbours. Essays on the origin of the Green Belt, and the strange rewilding of the zone around the Chernobyl nuclear plant – at least until war put the exclusion zone back into deadly geopolitics again – are also great capsule pieces.



For forteans, there are sadly no ley lines, magic circles or Bermuda triangles, but the essays on religious zones may be of interest. There's a detailed description of the Jewish *eruv* that encircles much of the island of Manhattan – a zone that has to be physically marked out to show where orthodox Jews are allowed to travel on the Sabbath because it is defined as "private" not public. Things get more complex in Brooklyn, where several overlapping and competing *eruvim* serve different communities (and different rabbis check weekly that the line is physically continuous).

There's a strong essay on the blurry borders of the Bible Belt in the States, a term first used by HL Mencken about the American South, but with borders expanding all the time. It is coupled with a discussion of Aceh on the northern tip of Sumatra, a Muslim territory that exercises sharia law amidst the highly polytheistic archipelago of Indonesia, and a treatment of the strict exclusion zone around North Sentinel Island in the Andaman Islands, which acts to preserve the tiny, undisturbed culture that has often violently repelled any incursion from outsiders, a policy backed up by Indian law. An American Christian missionary who travelled illegally to the island in 2016 and was killed by the indigenous people resulted in no prosecutions.

A book with a fitful fortean focus, then, but worth filleting for informative essays into several curious territories.

Roger Luckhurst

★★★

Textual Magic

Charms and Written Amulets in Mediæval England

Katherine Storm Hindley

University of Chicago Press 2023

Hb, 312pp, £36, ISBN 9780226825335

Seventeen years after Don Skemer published his impressive study of mediæval textual amulets, another American scholar, Katherine Storm Hindley, has given the subject another major push forward; and in the process tried to make a contribution to the history of literacy as well. Her subject is written and spoken charms, as recorded in England between the ninth and 15th centuries, and she has collected over 1,100 examples, with the expectation that thousands more lie undiscovered in manuscripts. She defines a charm as a text designed to produce a specific practical outcome from its enactment, either by being spoken aloud or by being worn or deposited in its written form. The distinction is crucial to her, because it enables her to draw conclusions of relevance to a better understanding of the relationship between literate and oral cultures. She also makes a contribution to that of mediæval popular religion, by showing that charms in many ways functioned as ordinary people's equivalent to saints' relics in healing and protecting.

A constant throughout the period is that theologians and physicians had serious doubts about the morality and efficacy of charms, but nobody else seems to have done so. Both kinds of them are therefore found throughout the period, but with two great watersheds in the use of them. The first followed the Norman conquest, as new texts arrived from the Continent, French became the standard language for spoken charms instead of Anglo-Saxon, non-alphabetic characters came into use, and written charms both sharply increased and became more unlike other kinds of text. The second great shift occurred between 1350 and 1500, when English replaced French as the language of the spoken kind, with a new suspicion of any charms that used unknown languages and characters.

Written charms, however, remained mostly in Latin, showing that different languages were regarded as transmitting power in different ways. Oral and written examples also tended to treat different afflictions.

Textual Magic

All of this flies in the face of the current scholarly orthodoxy that oral and literate cultures were indivisible: it appears that writing was perceived as having its own power, which transcended that of speech. This distinction was, however, vanishing by 1500, meaning that another watershed in the history of charms was approaching. This swift summary may indicate how much Katherine Storm Hindley's study has to offer not just the history of mediæval magic, but that of mediæval culture in general.

Ronald Hutton

★★★★★

Magical texts

Chris Hill explores an authoritative and visually stunning history of grimoires that mirror the societies that created them

Art of the Grimoire

An Illustrated History of Magic Books and Spells

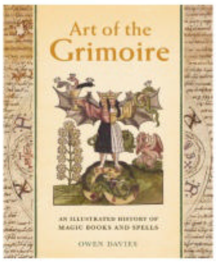
Owen Davies

Yale University Press 2023
Hb, 256p, £25, ISBN 9780300272017

With a proven record in the study of magic and witchcraft, Owen Davies brings us this full colour appraisal of magical texts from around the world. With a focus upon the visual dimension of the texts from their first appearance to the modern day, Davies offers a sophisticated discourse that entwines history, æsthetics and the emergence of print media. Magical texts, he believes, are complex epistemological objects that mirror the underlying desires of their host societies, curious and unique explorations of the gaps in our understanding of being in the world.

Davies addresses the materiality of the magical text and how the symbiosis between author and existent publishing technology offers an insight into our social and intellectual development. In the opening chapters he looks at the invention of writing and the pictographic forms that flourished in the Middle East and China between 3400 BC and 1200 BC. Referencing Sumerian clay curse tablets and Shang dynasty animal oracle bones, he cogently explores the significance of magic within early civil society and the discursive limitations inherent in media itself. With the appearance of papyrus and ink, he explores the act of writing as a magical operation that facilitated the depiction of new metaphysical dimensions, geometries, and elaborate systems of correspondences, from Greek magical papyri to the elaborate 4th- and 5th-century hagiographies of the Coptic Orthodox Church.

At the heart of Davies's history is the emergence of printing and the subsequent dissemination of hitherto occult secrets. The collapse of the Roman Empire in the late fourth century and the dispersal of intellectual property across its former territories he cites as a key moment in the gestation of magical works. A gestation that bore fruit by the 12th century as Islamic and Jewish thinkers assimilated the magical legacy of the ancient world into early works of astral and talismanic magic, angelology and numerology. Formulæ to control spirits, find love and recover lost treasure proved popular and for many budding magi, texts such as *The Comprehensive Compendium to the Entire Sea* by Persian scholar Al Tabasi (d.1089) and the 13th-century *Sworn Book of Honorius* offered a complete course in the magical arts. Davies's history also embraces the world beyond the West in this early period of production and looks at the importance of block printing in the Buddhist world from the second century onwards, drawing our attention to such wondrous artefacts as the *Diamond Sutra Scroll* (AD 868) recovered from the Dunhuang Caves in China in the 1930s.



Considering the invention of imaginary languages and scripts along with a distinctive vocabulary of glyphs and signs, Davies notes how the generic features of the grimoire underwent consolidation just in time for the invention of movable type printing by Johannes Gutenberg (c.1393/1406-1468). With the floodgates now open and the unwanted scrutiny of Church and State during the Renaissance and Reformation, publishers capitalised on the commercial potency of magical works. Legendary texts such as the *Testament of Solomon* could be reproduced on demand, augmenting an expanding catalogue of titles in a profoundly heterodox literary marketplace. Works by such notable mystics as Heinrich Agrippa (1486-1535) and Paracelsus (1493-1541) now attracted a wider audience and more rarefied alchemical texts were made available through advances in copper plate engraving. By the early 19th century the amateur occultist was spoiled for choice, be it tales of Doctor Faust, the *Dragon Rouge* and *Poule Noire* spell books, or the authoritative Francis Barrett's *The Magus* (1801). Less familiar works – Ethiopian Ge'ez scrolls, Ashanti Islamic manuscripts, Pennsylvanian Pow-Wow books and the visually exotic *The Illustrated Night Parade of One Hundred Demons* of Toriyama Sekien (1712-1788) – are given equal representation in Davies's history.

The latter part of Davies's work documents the age of pulp, the power of advertising and the commercial prowess of magical and occult texts. An interesting account of the imperial transmission of magical works looks in some detail at the legacy of French chapbooks in the Caribbean and Indian Ocean colonies as indigenous folk traditions absorbed imported ideas. The luminary occult publisher William De Laurence (1886-1936) capitalised on an innate demand for occult insights found within the African American diaspora through newspaper advertising and mail order.

Concluding with a review of more recent developments – whether lurid black magic pulps, republican Chinese prediction books (*shushu*) or the vying traditions and parallel universes of the Golden Dawn and Austin Osman Spare – Davies celebrates the scope of human invention and imagination in mapping the realms beyond our comprehension to the present day.

A tremendous volume with high production values and scholarship that will not disappoint.

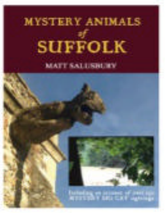
★★★★★

Mystery Animals of Suffolk

Matt Salusbury

Slack-jawed Amazement 2023 (see bitternbooks.co.uk)
Pb, 348pp, £15, ISBN 9781915721099

One of Britain's least populated counties, Suffolk is mostly rural, from the inland heaths and Forestry Commission plantations to the coastal woodlands and bird-haunted marshes. It has a feeling of a slightly forgotten place, shrouded in secrets. It has, indeed, had more than its fair share; extensive areas are still off-limits military training areas. Orford Ness, now a National Trust nature reserve, was once a top-secret military test site with many of its own mysteries; then, of course, there is Rendlesham Forest and its fabled UFO encounter.



So, if there was ever a county likely to harbour a rich history of mystery animals, Suffolk is it, and FT stalwart Matt Salusbury, who has strong connections to the county, is definitely the man to document them. As a result, *Mystery Animals of Suffolk* is a cut above the usual local mysteries book. Meticulous, detailed research, a fine grasp of place and folklore, and an open-minded but sceptical awareness of the fortean combine to produce a penetrating and satisfying exploration of Suffolk's peculiar creatures.

Taking a very wide definition of "animal", Salusbury writes of imps, fairies, a merman and headless horses, as well as woodwose, a sea monster seen by the novelist H Rider Haggard's family, the Shug Monkey, and that Suffolk favourite, Black Shuck.

As well as providing excellent coverage of both the historical and borderline mythical creatures of the county, he does not neglect more recent entities, with a whole section on the county's mystery big cats. This includes a diversion into other feline curiosities – Suffolk is particularly rich in mummified cats – and also covers known escaped exotics.

Well written, compendious and backed up by an excellent index and bibliography, this is an example of how a regional cryptozoology book ought to be written.

Ian Simmons

★★★★★

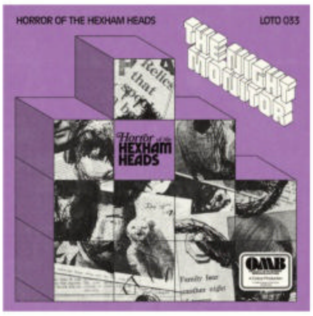
THE HAUNTED GENERATION

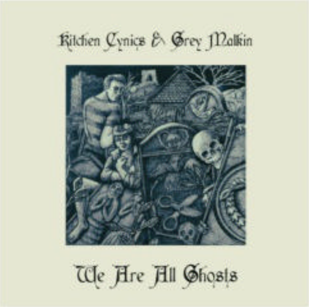
BOB FISCHER ROUNDS UP THE LATEST NEWS FROM THE PARALLEL WORLDS OF POPULAR HAUNTOLOGY

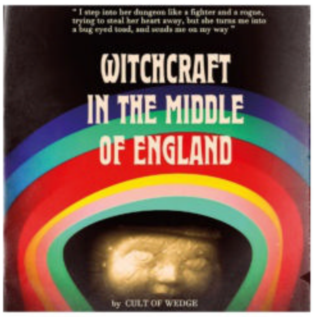
"I love that crossover of high strangeness in 1970s suburbia," says Neil Scrivin. "Creepy stone heads dug up in a garden, poltergeist activity and apparitions of weird creatures. It could almost be a follow-up to *The Stone Tape…*"

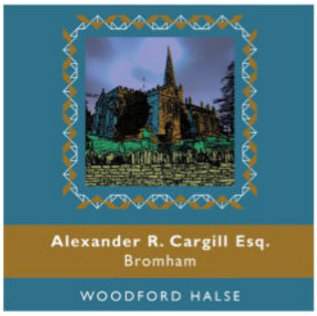
The story of the Hexham Heads (**FT294:42-47, 295:44-49**) is a Haunted Generation touchstone. Or rather two mysterious little touchstones, unearthed by brothers Colin and Leslie Robson in their Northumberland garden in the early 1970s. Bringing these tiny carved faces into the house seemingly unleashed a wave of supernatural strangeness, including nocturnal visitations from a bizarre half-man half-goat creature and – as reported by Celtic artefacts expert Dr Anne Ross – an encounter with a passing werewolf. When the story was featured on BBC1's current affairs programme *Nationwide* in 1976, it lodged forever into the fevered nightmares of children… well, nationwide. Neil, recording as The Night Monitor, has used it as the inspiration for his excellent new album, *Horror of the Hexham Heads.* "I'm on the sceptical side now," he explains. "But my approach with The Night Monitor is always to take events at face value. I wanted to amplify the spooky aspects of the story, imagining the album as the mid-1970s soundtrack to a lost TV documentary". It's a splendid record, an evocative collection of sinister synth instrumentals and rather alarming soundscapes. Dig a couple up this April from libraryoftheoccult.bandcamp.com.

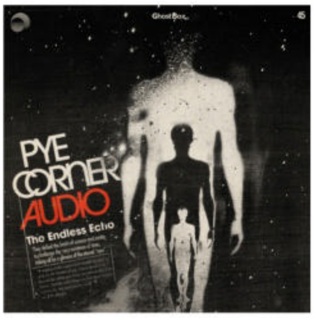
Equally fascinated by suburban 1970s rumness is Pete Hackett, although his new album *Witchcraft in the Middle of England* is not so much Frank Bough in a cosy cardigan as Pan's People in spangly hotpants. Under his nom-de-plume Cult of Wedge, Pete is a master of old school feelgood pop music, following in the proud tradition of fellow hairy Brummies Jeff Lynne and Roy Wood. Either of whom could easily be responsible for a flurry of werewolf sightings themselves. With an opening number dedicated to the Enfield Poltergeist and a title track detailing Pete's vain attempts to woo a Black Country sorceress, there's poptastic fun galore. Summon the spirits to cultofwedge.bandcamp.com.

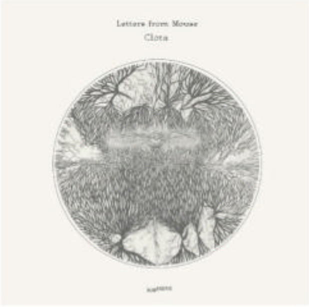

HORROR OF THE HEXHAM HEADS
LOTO 033
THE NIGHT MONITOR
Horror of the HEXHAM HEADS
OMB




WITCHCRAFT IN THE MIDDLE OF ENGLAND
by CULT OF WEDGE







In the folk world, I very much recommend *We Are All Ghosts*, a new collaboration between Kitchen Cynics and Grey Malkin. It's a collection of stunning supernatural ballads lent spine-chilling authenticity by the timeless vocals of Mr Cynics himself – aka Aberdeen singer-songwriter Alan Davidson. Bag a copy by materialising insubstantially at fennycompton.bandcamp.com. And staying north of the Scottish border, soothing folkloric ambience can be found on *Clota*, a new album of modular synth compositions dedicated to the Patron Goddess of the River Clyde. The exemplary work of Steven 'Letters From Mouse' Anderson, it flows freely through lettersfrommouse.bandcamp.com.

Similarly wistful is *Bromham*, a pæan to faded childhood memories by the artist formally known as Alexander R Cargill Esq. Bromham itself is the tiny Wiltshire outpost where Alex spent his earliest years, and the album combines fuzzy BBC Schools electronics with spoken contributions from some of the village's oldest residents – including Pete Paget, veteran chairman of the parish council, and Alex's own 104-year-old Great Uncle Ivor. It's located just off the A350 at woodfordhalse.bandcamp.com. Interested in darker fayre? *In the Shadow of the Bomb* is a new album by British Stereo Collective, focusing on the more disturbing aspects of 1970s life. Think Two-tone meets Gary Numan, on a record that deals expertly with the lingering psychic trauma of power cuts and IRA bomb threats. Visit thebritishstereocollective.bandcamp.com.

The Endless Echo is the new album from Pye Corner Audio, inspired by composer Martin Jenkins's fascination with his perception of all things temporal. "It's an exploration of the elasticity of time," says Martin. "Even though time is measurable, it's often experienced in different ways. When I create music, hours can pass in what feels like minutes. Conversely, time slows to a crawl when you're bored. And events in the past can seem an age ago, but also mere moments…" The album is a hypnotic collection of beats and woozy ambience, and if you can't shuffle a foot to irresistible tracks like 'On The Clock' then you've probably slowed to a crawl yourself. Nudge the little hand forward to ghostbox.co.uk.

To finish off, it's always nice to see Chris Sharp emerging from his underground bunker. Recording under the rather Brutalist pseudonym of Concretism, Chris has resumed his lifelong fascination with 20th century nuclear paranoia on a new single, *39 Furnival Street*. "It was a secret Cold War telephone exchange in the heart of London," he explains. "The single is a musical exploration of the tunnels, and the technology within them". Comprising two slices of immaculate, beat-driven synth workouts and a flurry of associated remixes, downloads are available from concretism.bandcamp.com, with limited vinyl sold exclusively through normanrecords.com. Four-minute warning, passing werewolves and temporal elasticity permitting, both should be available by the time you read this article.

Visit the Haunted Generation website at www.hauntedgeneration.co.uk, or email hauntedgeneration@gmail.com

THOUGHT BUBBLE CONVENTION 2023

STEVE TOASE REPORTS FROM YORKSHIRE'S COMIC ART FESTIVAL, NOV 6-12 NOV 2023

Aliens, the paranormal, and the strange have been at the heart of comics for nearly a century. For me, comics are the most fortean artform, and, in my humble opinion, Thought Bubble is the premier comics festival in the country.

Although the main focus of this week-long celebration of comics is the two-day convention (more on that in a moment), the festival also hosts talks, workshops and exhibitions, both in Leeds, where Thought Bubble first started, and its current home of Harrogate.

Why do I think Thought Bubble is the best comics event in the country? For me it stands out because it focuses purely on comics. It never tries to be a pop culture convention, with actors from major franchises signing autographs for a fee. Instead, everyone exhibiting is there for their love of the artform; and without getting too gushing, it's these people who make the festival the success it is.

Thought Bubble is held in the Harrogate Convention Centre, with three halls holding around 600 exhibitors and invited guests, and this has always been a really special part of the weekend. As you walk the rows, trying to budget your money, you will find big-name artists and writers like Disraeli, John Wagner, Jeff Lemire, Tula Lotay and Alison Sampson. Alongside them, you will also discover people who are starting their own small comic companies, publishing their own work and finding a place alongside the better-known creators. Thought Bubble is full of enthusiasm and eclecticism, showing how diverse comics can be, from the beautiful nature-inspired work of Katie Whittle to the Ukranian-influenced comics and 'zines of Yorkshire-born Kristyna Baczynski, the steampunk art of Dr Geof and the gorgeous work of Tanya Roberts and Gabriel Guingol. There really is something for everyone.

One of the weekend's highlights is the midcon party held at the nearby Majestic Hotel. You really get a sense of how egalitarian and inclusive Thought Bubble is, with comic professionals like Keiron Gillen and Sarah Gordon on the decks, playing tunes to a mix of exhibitors, guests and congoers, while everyone makes a pilgrimage to the men's toilets, a monument to a forgotten, more elegant age (Really. An anthology comic about the majesty of the Majestic's men's toilets is going to be released in 2024).

During the two-day show, Thought Bubble hosts workshops and talks – in 2023, tying into the British Library 'Fantasy: Realms of the Imagination' exhibition – as well as being home to the annual 2000AD Writer and Artist talent searches.

Eclectic and inspiring, Thought Bubble is also inclusive in the widest possible sense of the word. From being held in an accessible convention centre, to having all the volunteers trained in autism awareness, to the open-armed inclusion of LGBTQ+ creators, Thought Bubble is very welcoming to everyone with a love of comics.
www.thoughtbubblefestival.com/

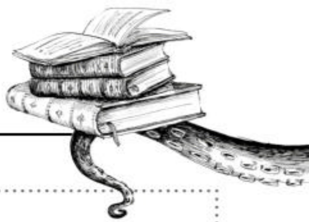
ENTRANCE 4
Thought Bubble
THE YORKSHIRE COMIC ART FESTIVAL
COMIC CONVENTION
11 & 12 NOVEMBER 2023
THOUGHTBUBBLEFESTIVAL.COM

HORROR
DSTLRY

SPOTLIGHT ON JASON AARON
COMIXOLOGY ORIGINALS
DSTLRY

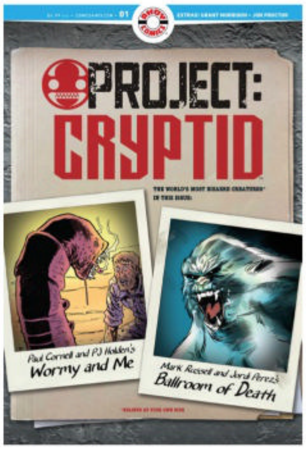
AZ RENSHAW
ARTIST/WRITER/EDITOR

PHOTOS: SIMON GODSAVE



COMICS AND GRAPHIC NOVELS

STEVE TOASE SELECTS A FEW OF THE BEST TITLES HE PICKED UP AT 2023'S THOUGHT BUBBLE CONVENTION


PROJECT:
CRYPTID
Paul Cornell and PJ Holden's
Wormy and Me
Mark Russell and Jordi Perez's
Ballroom of Death

Project: Cryptid #1

Mark Russell, Paul Cornell, Jordi Pérez, PJ Holden

comicsahoy.com/comics/project-cryptid-1

31pp, £2.55

This is *definitely* a fortean comic. Containing two comic stories, as well as a prose tale by Grant Morrison, *Project Cryptid* is funny, cutting and doesn't take itself too seriously. Let's be honest, who could resist a buddy cop story about a Mongolian Death Worm?

Blobby Horror

Various, ed. Erika Price

Frission Comics

Pb,70pp, £10, www.etsy.com/listing/1608117715/blobby-horror-anthology-zine

Back in the Nineties, few of us realised as we watched Saturday early evening TV that we were witnessing the arrival of an eldritch entity – a true god of chaos erupting across the light entertainment universe in vivid pink and yellow. Through this series of short comics a collection of writers and artists commit to paper the true horror of Mr Blobby. I only hope the price for revealing the terrifying truth was one worth paying! A fantastic theme, explored with enthusiasm and a real sense of satire and the grotesque.

Henge #1-3

Tom Eglington, Phil Buckenham, Boo Cook

https://hengemusic.com/products/henge-comic-1

£5 per issue

I've got to confess that the band Henge had passed me by until I picked up these comics from Tom Eglington's table at Thought Bubble, which is a particular surprise considering my love for psychedelic space rock and megaliths. The comic follows the adventures of Henge as they respond to cries for help from Earth, picked up on their interstellar audio receptors, with issues 2 and 3 continuing their efforts to defeat evil Urshto's attempts to inflict misery on humanity. The final issue continues to follow Henge's struggle, featuring mind mazes, mushroom-shaped spaceships and sacred plasma. The colourwork is bright and, well, psychedelic, as befits the subject matter, and contains plenty of humour as well as weirdness. As you can see from my example, no prior knowledge of Henge is necessary to enjoy the comics, but the stories might act as a gateway to broadening your musical horizons.

Skeeters #1

Kelly Williams, Bob Frantz, Kevin Cuffe

Mad Cave Comics

£4.99, https://madcavestudios.com/product/skeeters-1/

Smalltown America, weird research facilities and mutant alien mosquitoes. With references to cryptozoology and conspiracies (energy vampires and shadow people), *Skeeters* is full of forteana and boasts some beautifully visceral artwork. The use of crimson for the mosquitoes leaves no doubt about what they are interested in. The only question, after the first issue, is how bad things are going to get...

Cuckoo

Joe Sparrow

Shortbox Comics

£17

Cuckoo is a story about not fitting in, finding people who understand you, geometric meteors, aliens and strange powers. While struggling with her art course, anxiety, and being 19, Dorothy Weaver finds herself developing unusual abilities, leading to her making her first real friend and her life changing in unforseen ways. The story is very well told, and the artwork is gorgeous, with a precise use of colour and design. One of the most beautiful books of 2023.

Dead Seas

Cavan Scott, Nick Brokenshire

IDW Comics

£16.99

Ghosts are real, and the ectoplasm they produce is incredibly valuable, but dangerous to harvest. Convicts are given the chance to reduce their sentences by working on prison ships to collect this volatile material. A horror comic, a disaster story, a takedown of the prison-industrial complex and a family drama, this is an excellent visceral read. A lot of credit must be given to Nick Brokenshire for the artwork, with the use of colour and texture throughout enhancing the storytelling – and the design of the ghosts is incredibly unsettling. A perfect addition to your horror comic collection.

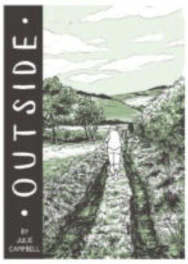
Boris Karloff: Gold Key Mysteries #1

Michael W Conrad, Steve Orlando, Johnny Dombrowski, Kelly Williams and others

Gold Key Comics

£4.99, www.goldkeycomics.com/collections/boris-karloff-gold-key-mysteries

Gold Key Comics has relaunched, continuing its 1960s relationship with Boris Karloff to bring an updated version of the anthology horror and mystery comic of yesteryear. Inside this first issue there are disappearing houses, ambitious chefs and doppelgängers. Well worth a look if you enjoy stories with a twist.



Harvest Book 1 and 2

Julian Payne, Zoë Elkins

Pyjama Cardinal Comics

£10.00/£12.00, www.pyjamacardinalcomics.com/comicbooksandprints

Harvest is a story about Greta, jobless after university and living with her stepmother in a small village. I don't want to give too much away, but there is a sense of threat right from the start in this comic that riffs on folk horror and fairy tales. Sometimes the panels of Julian Payne's stunning artwork contain nothing but rural landscapes – but you can't shake the feeling that something bad is lurking there. Genuinely disturbing and a gorgeous comic.

Merrick The Sensational Elephantman Vol. 1 and Vol. 2

Tom Ward, Luke Parker

Ward and Parker Comic

£9.99/£14.99, www.merrickcomic.co.uk/

Wearing its artistic influences on its sleeve, *Merrick The Sensational Elephantman* takes the historical story of John Merrick's life and mixes it with a fictional world of secret societies, deals with the Devil and fortean favourites like Spring-heeled Jack. With tight storytelling, and art perfectly suited to the London setting, this is a beautiful read.

Mr Jones's Smoking Bones, #1-5

Iqbal Ali, Priscilla Grippa

Iqbal A. Comics

£5 each, www.iqbala.com/smoking-bones

It's the mid-19th century and Mr Barzakh is in London, a city haunted by smoking skeletons, burning cemeteries and obsessions with the spirit world. Set against a background of the East India Company's declining power, secret cults and mysterious murders, this is a fascinating tale, exploring the space where science and the occult met in the shadow of the British Empire. With flashbacks to India that don't shy away from the brutality of the Raj, the story is perfectly told in black and white artwork. An excellent comic told from a different perspective to others set in this era.

Outside

Julie Campbell

£5.95 www.etsy.com/uk/shop/ArtbyJulieCampbell

Comics like this are one of the joys of Thought Bubble. *Outside* is a small self-produced book, containing two beautifully illustrated comics about reconnecting with nature during the Covid pandemic. Simple, with lovely artwork and a feeling of joy for the natural world.

Roads less taken

A pair of ambitious horror films aim for something beyond the genre's familiar tropes and devices, but each comes somewhat unstuck in the process

All You Need is Death

Dir Paul Duane, Ireland 2023
In cinemas from 19 April

A very strange film indeed. Straddling the border that separates body horror from folk horror, with a bit of the Roy Castle 'voodoo jazz' segment from *Dr Terror's House of Horrors* thrown in; you could create a truly bizarre Venn diagram to summarise this film.

The central characters are Anna and Aleks, who, like most young couples, are absolutely mad keen on obscure Irish songs. I don't mean U2 B-sides; we're talking about Irish folk songs. Getting wind of one such number – a properly ancient one, rooted deep in mythology – they track it down to a dilapidated house in the middle of nowhere, the home of Rita Concannon, the only woman who can sing it. Despite being a mad old crone who hides from strangers in a cupboard, she agrees to perform the song; what she doesn't know is that it is surreptitiously being recorded, which, according to the lore, is strictly verboten. This point is rammed home, so to speak, when shortly after her visitors have left Rita is brutally murdered with a bottle of whisky.

> *The second half is phantasmagoric and irritatingly obscure*

After this, the plot gets harder to follow. Rita's son turns up and determines to find her killer, setting out on a path that eventually leads him to Anna and then to Aleks, but nothing is what it seems. The last 15 minutes are extraordinary, calling to mind *Xtro*, Zulawksi's *Possession*, *Inseminoid* and sundry other baffling or gruesome horrors.

I preferred the first half to the second. The theme of collecting old folk songs is a good one. The style is naturalistic, the settings are recognisable, and there are people on screen other than the main characters. The second half is totally different – phantasmagorical, irritatingly obscure and eventually drowning in buckets of blood – and has a less than satisfying conclusion. The theme running through it all is obsessive love, and the point at which one is prepared to do the unthinkable to preserve it.

Not wholly successful, then, but neither is it a gong show. It isn't scary, but it does have a fine sense of impending, inescapable doom. It has enough individuality to stand out from run-of-the-mill folk horror and sufficient brutality to make an impression in the field more broadly; but it may be just too abstruse to make an impression outside the genre.

Daniel King

★★★☆☆

Lovely, Dark and Deep

Dir Teresa Sutherland, US 2023
Available on digital platforms

A newly-qualified National Park Ranger, Lennon (Georgina Campbell, star of 2022's *Barbarian*), is assigned to a remote area as her first detail. Here she patrols, picks up litter and aids hikers in trouble. However, she has an ulterior motive: she is also desperately searching for her daughter, who went missing in that region some time before. In fact, her daughter is not the only person to have disappeared there without trace. As Lennon goes about her tasks she listens to a podcast, one of those that digs up old unsolved crimes, all about the mysterious goings on.

All very promising: an intriguing storyline, achingly beautiful locations and the prospect of gruesome events to come. Unfortunately, *Lovely, Dark and Deep* doesn't deliver the goods. Even the title (taken from a poem by Robert Frost) is merely allusive, having little to do with the characters or the story. Frankly, it's a little pretentious, as if someone had Googled 'poems about forests' and picked a random quote.

Secondly, there's a massive plot hole: surely, if so many people have disappeared in such a specific area and in such mysterious circumstances then a higher authority than the Park Rangers would have investigated, particularly since at least one Park Ranger is among the missing. Yet no one seems to wonder why the police or the FBI aren't crawling over the place.

Thirdly, for the first half (of an 87-minute movie) nothing scary happens, much less anything terrifying. There's simply not enough incident to hold one's interest. Perhaps aware of this, the director throws the kitchen sink at the second half; it's absolutely barking, as Lennon begins to lose her grip on sanity when the isolation of her situation gets hold of her. The action shifts away from the National Park (a shame, because the stunning scenery is the best thing on offer here) to a series of dark interiors where all manner of weird things happen, using tropes familiar to anyone who has seen a horror movie, ever. The big reveal, when it comes, takes place, inexplicably, in a dark room with two characters chest deep in water.

Watching this film is a frustrating experience. Clearly the director is aiming for something a little more ambitious than the usual backwoods thriller; rather than being an out-and-out horror, this is a psychological horror; which in practice means you can get away with doing less. There are echoes of films like *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and *Don't Look Now*, but this film lacks the atmosphere and artistry of those. In delivering so little, and in such a ham-fisted way, *Lovely, Dark and Deep* doesn't even make as big an impact as more routine backwoods horrors such as *Scalps* or *Just Before Dawn*, which at least hit their targets. The locations (the film was shot in Portugal) are truly breathtaking, but sadly that just isn't enough.

Daniel King

★★☆☆☆

TELEVISION

FT's very own couch potato, STU NEVILLE, casts an eye over the small screen's current fortean offerings

Forty years ago, a publishing sensation was born: a book, promoted as wholly factual, by journalist Jay Anson about the haunting of a house in Amityville, Long Island, which had been the site of a massacre years before. The perp, Ronnie DeFeo, claimed at the time he'd been possessed by malign forces that had forced him to take the lives of his family; when the young Lutz family subsequently moved in they apparently experienced all manner of terrifying phenomena. Anson's book sold in the millions and a film (and multiple sequels) soon followed, confusing and elaborating the story for the next four decades. Now, 40 years on, MGM+ have attempted to unsplice the knots of confusion in a well-crafted four-part series, ***Amityville: An Origin Story***, each episode looking at a different aspect of the case.

Part 1, "The Haunting", deals broadly with the alleged events: Chris Quarantino, elder son of Kathy Lutz (and stepson of George) says he wants to set the record straight about the paranormal goings-on in the house on Ocean Avenue . With George and Kathy Lutz dead, he's the key witness. The series sets out its stall, with unsubtle indications of where it's likely to go.

As is customary with any documentary featuring beardy American late-Sixties criminal subcultures, there's a Beatles reference (George's early flirtation with Transcendental Meditation provides the link, rather than the usual "Helter Skelter".) There's a lot of focus on Lutz's Vietnam experience, his time with a biker gang, drugs, drink and guns; though by the time he had married Kathy he seemed to have cleaned up his act. However, soon after moving into the house he started wandering around at night talking to himself and became quick to anger. What's odd is that the programme waits until the last 15 minutes to start cataloguing the alleged paranormal events – talking pigs, mysterious trotter prints in the snow, a fly infestation, a bleeding wall – as if they were a mere afterthought; which they may well have been all along.

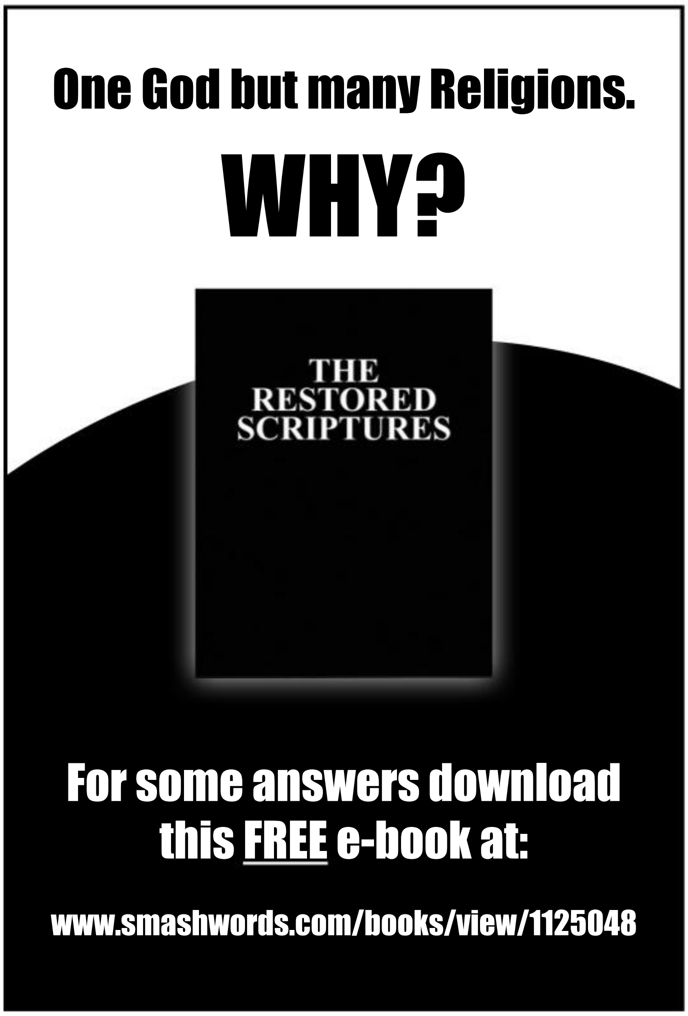
Anson's Amityville book sold in the millions and a film soon followed

Part 2 ("The Crime") starts with *Mad Men*-era ads for Long Island as the ideal suburb, all tail-fins and sun loungers, along with Amityville's history as a mob haven. The scene set, there follows much big-lapelled, bouffant, archive news footage of the shooting of six members of the DeFeo family. Much is made of the bodies; a friend describes them being carried into the church with the credibility-stretching detail that the coffins were open, in some cases exposing the gunshot injuries, and that DeFeo's mobster grandfather was toting a gun at the wake. The implication is that the family were in no way innocent despite three of the victims being children. DeFeo is interviewed, describing the antagonism between him and his father and describing the murders as "a shame": he initially denied involvement, before a suspiciously quick *volte-face*, suddenly becoming hell-bent on taking the rap.

Part 3 ("The Big Time") focuses on Anson's book and the subsequent film adaptations as the whole thing becomes a well-run and lucrative circus. There are lots of *Exorcist* and *Omen* references; the cultural zeitgeist was very possession-oriented. The Lutzes themselves apparently deduced that DeFeo *did* commit the murders, but was spiritually coerced into doing so by the house. William Weber, DeFeo's defence attorney, was writing a book about the case and offered the same opinion: the fact that the Lutzes made their initial statements from Weber's office tends to point to a rather obvious conclusion, given there was clearly money to be made. Enter the investigators, including Hans Holzer and Ed and Lorraine Warren. There are séances and news reports; the Lutzes dispense with Weber and instead engage Jay Anson; and we all know where it went from there. The Lutzes did extremely well from the proceeds, especially as the juggernaut rumbled on with the movie – universally panned by critics, but a huge success at the box office. However, the cracks began to show as friends of both the DeFeos and the Lutzes said they found the supernatural claims ridiculous – local vox-pops say much the same, and Weber then cheerfully and damningly admits that the whole story was a fraud, cooked up over several bottles of wine.

And so on to the final part, "Feedback Loop", which tries to make sense of what's gone before; and it transpires there was rather a lot they were holding back. Stepson Christopher flatly pins the whole thing on George, alleging that Lutz was using drugs they'd found stashed, presumably by Ronnie DeFeo: cut to a montage of people speaking in tongues, unrelated pics of Uri Geller and Crowley, and (for some reason) guppies. A highlight is George and Kathy's "exorcism" at the hands of "The Archbishop of Canterbury's Exorcist", Christopher Neil-Smith of St Saviour's, London. The terminology is important here, as the ritual is described as an exorcism by George, but as a blessing by others – and they are very different things. Just because Neil-Smith was an exorcist, it doesn't mean every rite he performed was an exorcism. Footage of the ritual lurches into the comic as the reverend, who bears a strong resemblance to Robin Williams, grabs the heads of the Lutzes, kneeling before him at crotch level, and, with his head rolling and yelling, appears to be enjoying the occasion.

Holzer points out that there was money to be made; this, along with Weber's earlier admission, makes it clear how we're supposed to view the whole saga. And then, in the last 15 minutes, comes a big reveal: documents from George Lutz's previous annulment reveal that he may or may not have had Antisocial Personality Disorder, along with the disclosure that psychiatrists examining Ronnie DeFeo concluded he experienced similar. So, this is where it's left – cynical, manipulative people spot a cultural trope and exploit it mercilessly. And 40 years – and 30 film sequels – later, the exploitation continues. *With thanks to Ruth Morris.*



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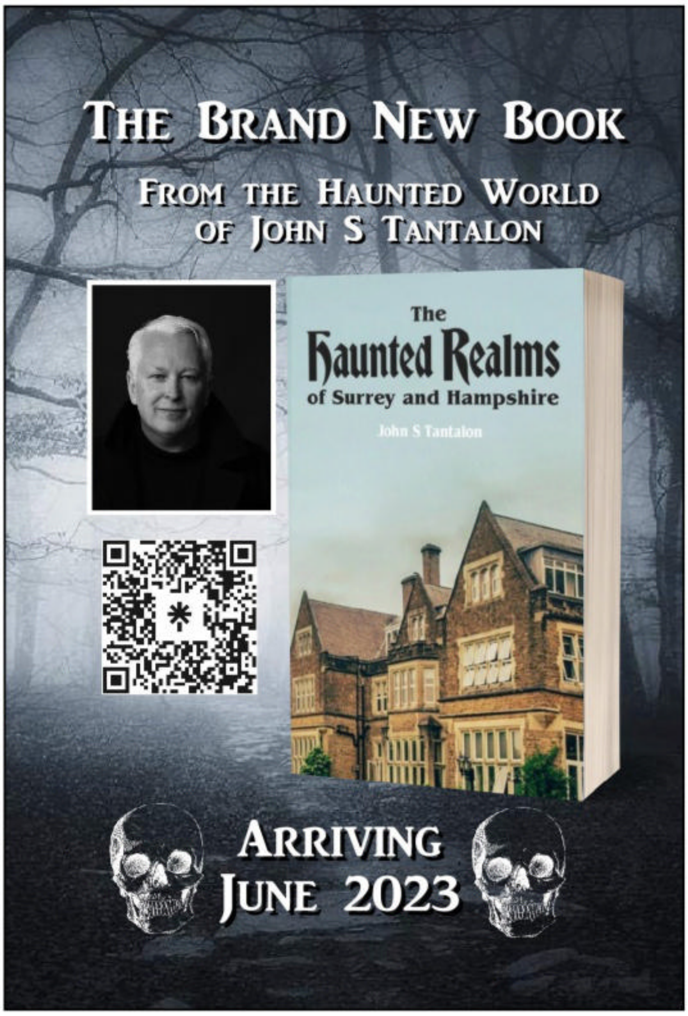

THE BRAND NEW BOOK

FROM THE HAUNTED WORLD
OF JOHN S TANTALON

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ARRIVING
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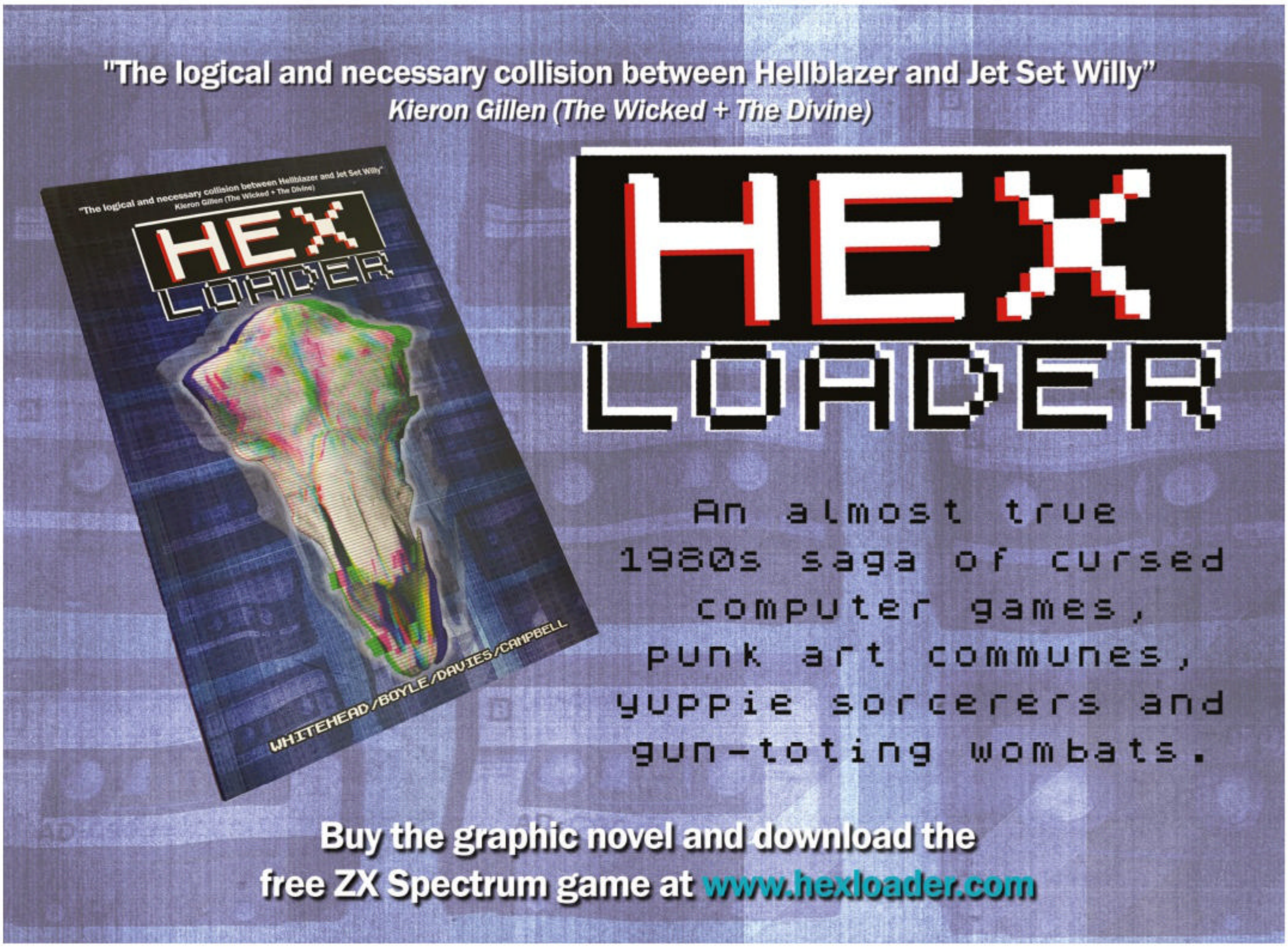

"The logical and necessary collision between Hellblazer and Jet Set Willy"
Kieron Gillen (The Wicked + The Divine)

"The logical and necessary collision between Hellblazer and Jet Set Willy"
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LETTERS

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Backstone Circle

Strange phenomena experienced at stone circles, and especially the Rollright Stones in Oxfordshire, can be found in Paul Devereux's book *Places of Power* (2nd edition, Cassell Illustrated, 1999).

The filmmaker Jeff Figgis recounts the experiences of the late photographer Sir Simon Marsden, also at Rollright, where he was thrown back by an invisible force, with his camera ripped from his hands and which left a nasty bruise, recounted in *Simon Marsden: A Life in Pictures* [**FT370:66-67**].

Ron Gandy in his article *It's Weird Up North!* [**FT343:20-21**], reporting on the 2016 conference of the same title, recounts speakers giving talks on all manner of weirdness, and this included Steve Jones discussing strange experiences at Backstone Circle on Ilkley Moor.

In his book *The Old Stones of Elmet* (Capall Bann Publishing, 2003), Paul Bennett relates a weird encounter, experienced by himself and a friend when camping at the circle, occurring at around midnight on 12 July 1989.

Although the book is now out of print, Bennett repeats his experiences on the Backstone Circle section of The Northern Antiquarian website (scroll down to the section titled Fortean History: www.thenorthernantiquarian.org/2014/09/22/backstone-circle/).

After a session of 'spirit invocation' (though the author doesn't specify exactly what this involved), the pair reported seeing a vision of several hooded figures walking in a circle, gradually increasing speed, until they were replaced by a bizarre light show, described by Bennett "as two-dimensional horizontal lights", whizzing around the circle. After these vanished, Bennett reported entering the circle, and feeling an intense coldness, like walking into a freezer, and dropping to his knees with chill as he reached the centre.

Bearing in mind that his book wasn't about fortean phenomena but about the location and history of standing stones in West Yorkshire, it seems an unnecessary and bizarre thing to fabricate, and so – rightly or wrongly – I have given the author the benefit of the doubt.

There are other notes on bizarre events at the circle. Carol Oliver added a comment (which she also repeats on her Mountain Coward website): "The sight you saw at Backstone that night sounds very much like an old Wiccan 'mill' or round dance where they circle rapidly while chanting to raise energy to use for various 'work' (curing animals, potato blight etc). I really wish I'd been with you, especially for the 'light show' afterwards :-) I'm sure it was pretty scary though."

This comment can be found by scrolling down the page to the last few paragraphs of her Backstone Circle entry on her website at: https://mountaincowardadventures.wordpress.com/2015/02/28/hunting-haunted-backstone-circle/

A correspondent, named only as 'smackedpentax' writes: "It is a shame you didn't experience the 'closed door' (or more likely 'Get The F**K Outta Here!') experience, because it is really unnerving when it happens. And it does quite frequently – I personally know four people it has happened to! Another place I find creepy is Horncliffe Circle – and that is well worth a visit next time you are up there." This can be found by scrolling down the page at: https://mountaincowardadventures.wordpress.com/2015/02/28/hunting-haunted-backstone-circle/

As a fortean researcher, and a native of 'weird' West Yorkshire, I visited Backstone Circle in late 2022, intending to write it up for my blog Spooky Vocation, but I had no odd feelings or experiences.

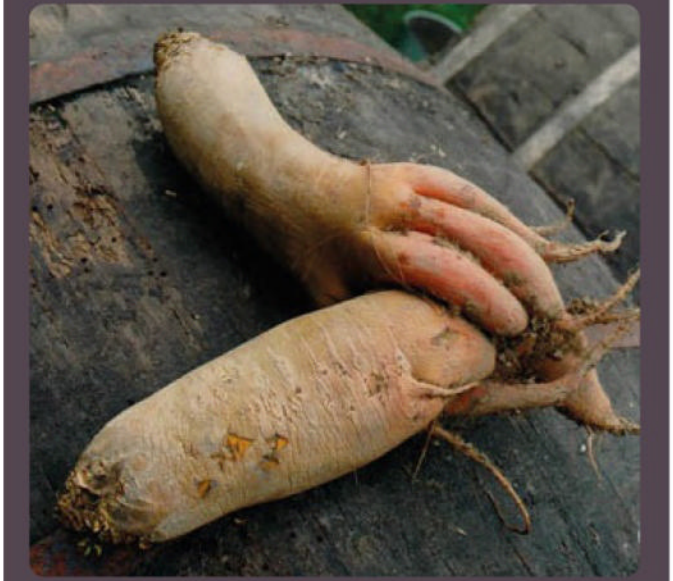
Rob Gandy described Backstone Circle as 'hard-to-find' and he weren't kidding! When I visited, it was almost hidden from view by long grass and I missed it several times. The best place to start is the Ilkley Moor landmark of the Cow and Calf Rocks. Then forge ahead, crossing the stream called Backstone Beck, then up the hill, keeping the Beck on your left. Eventually, you arrive at a crossroads in the path. Push on ahead, and Backstone Circle is about 100 yards to your right. If you reach a paved, crescent-shaped seating area, then you've gone past it. Turn around and go back and it's about 50-100 yards on your left.

If you're planning to do a lot of country walking, I recommend Christopher Goddard's book *The West Yorkshire Moors* (2nd edition, Gritstone Publishing Co-Operative, 2019) including loads of detail and clear, hand-drawn maps, and which is one of the few publications featuring Backstone Circle and brief details of its fortean happenings.

What we really need to do is to organise an overnight investigation, accompanied by someone with experience of 'spirit evocation'. Any volunteers?

Andy Owens
Halifax, West Yorkshire

SIMULACRA CORNER



This distinctive tuber was photographed by Jean-Jacques Colin of Pont-Aven in France.

We are always glad to receive pictures of spontaneous forms and figures, or any curious images. Send them (with your postal address) to **Fortean Times, PO Box 1200, Whitstable CT1 9RH** or to **sieveking@forteantimes.com**

The Megatron

I was very interested to read about the Megatron [**FT441:30-37**], but my interest was somewhat tempered with frustration, with it being the first I had heard about it even though I spent the entire period of its existence well within travelling distance of it! Had I known it was there, I would have been a regular patron.

One thing in the report got me thinking though, and that was the report by 'Wes' the airman concerning his encounter with the 'werewolf'. He reports it as being 5ft (1.5m) high, 200lb (90kg) in weight, and thin [p.33]. The thing that puzzles me is that I am at least 6 inches taller than that, 40lb lighter and far from thin. If it was 5ft/200lb, why say it was thin? That's a BMI of over 39. If it was 5ft and thin, it would be around 90lb (BMI 17). In the grand scheme of things of course, this is of no importance, but it does perfectly illustrate the dangers of putting too much weight (no pun intended!) on witness reports.

Chris Dean
Builth Wells, Powys

Cathar Mania

I started reading Arthur Guirdham's books [about reincarnation] in the 1970s and was so carried away by the first one that I decided to move to Bath. Although Guirdham never says he lived in Bath, it is easy to recognise the city through his descriptions.

When I moved to Bath I got a job as a receptionist in a doctor's surgery in Pulteney Street. After a while I discovered that Dr Guirdham was a patient at the surgery and everyone knew him well. One day one of the GPs in the Practice rang down to the reception area and requested the notes for a *Miss* Smith as he had been given those for *Mrs* Smith by mistake. I found the notes, which were rather dilapidated, and when I picked them up a letter from Dr Guirdham fell out. I am afraid I read the letter as I thought the coincidence was too great to ignore. In the letter Dr Guirdham described that he had been on holiday in the Lake District with Miss Smith (pseudonym for Clare Mills) when she had had what seemed to be a heart attack. Dr Guirdham knew she was a patient at Pulteney Street, so he thought he would write to her doctor and mention the incident. Coincidently (or not) I was in the middle of reading *The Lake and the Castle* at the time (Guirdham's latest book in which he actually describes the 'heart attack' incident.)

So then I had proof that Clare (Miss Smith) was a real person and the described incident was true. I asked the other receptionists about 'Miss Smith' and they told me she was a middle-aged lady with a pink and white complexion and fair hair (exactly as described by Guirdham in *The Cathars and Reincarnation)*. So imagine my excitement when she came into the surgery one day. and yes, she did look exactly as described by Guirdham. who also mentions that she was a physiotherapist (which she was). I was so thrilled to have this secret knowledge about her. Of course I never should have read Guirdham's letter in the first place, but it literally fell out of the notes. And I must confess I do not believe in coincidence.

As for the Bath Cathar mania, it was very real. Loads of people started to 'remember' past lives as Cathars. There were organised trips to the Languedoc and all the Cathar landmarks. *The Holy Blood and the Holy Grail* came out and the three authors, Baigent, Lee and Lincoln, gave very successful lectures in Bath to crowded audiences.

By now, 18 people, all living in or near Bath, claimed to have lived together as Cathars. It was a huge romantic idea enthusiastically taken up by the inhabitants of Bath, which already boasted a lot of eccentric inhabitants.

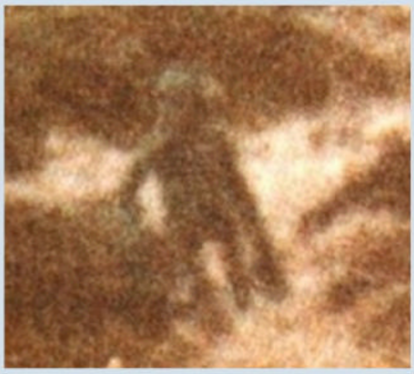
At the time I believed all the Cathar stories until I came across a little book by Lynda Harris, *The Cathars and Arthur Guirdham* (published by PsyPioneer), which manages to throw cold water on the whole story. Towards the end of the book, Harris says: "It should be added at this stage that several people whom I interviewed told me that Guirdham's wife, and all the other members of his immediate family (with one exception) were sceptical about the stories of group reincarnation which came to dominate much of his later life. Mrs Guirdham it seems took a particularly dim view of the whole set of stories..."

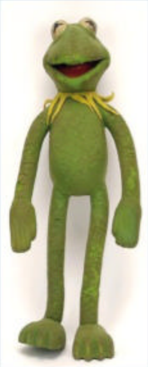
Harris queries whether Clare Mills really existed and says that even if she did, all the stories could have been made up. I know for sure that she was a real person, but as for the stories, I now have doubts. One really fascinating observation that Harris makes is that Guirdham never *actually* met any of the 'reincarnated Cathars' who he had known in a previous life and were now supposedly living near him. I didn't believe this at first, but when I read the book again I saw it was true.

I have no idea what the Cathar situation is at the moment. When I was in Glastonbury a few years ago, I saw a building with a notice inviting people to join the Cathars. Apparently (according to them) Catharism has always been flourishing underground – somewhere! This doesn't seem very likely as Catharism can only be passed on by the laying on of hands by their *parfaits* (priests); and if all the *parfaits* are dead... then what?

Anna David (pseud)
Wellington, Somerset

Editorial note: see the author's previous letter, **FT408:75**





Ilkley Moor 'alien'

For a long time, something about the famous image of a 'being' on Ilkley Moor, taken by 'Philip Spencer', struck me as being strangely familiar – but I couldn't quite put my finger on what it was. My 'eureka' moment came a few weeks ago when reminiscing with my cousin about a large, bendy and poseable Kermit the Frog doll that she had as a child. A bit of Internet research revealed that these were produced by Bendy Toys from 1977, made of green latex foam over a bendable wire frame, with a height of around 18 inches (see attached image of an original toy from the Muppet Wiki).

The key thing about the doll – apart from its poseability – are the two characteristic dome-like eyes on top of the head. These are remarkably similar to what is seen in the 1987 photo, as are the long arms and flat, spade-like hands. The only significant difference would seem to be a lack of Kermit's big froggy feet, although these would not necessarily be obvious if the figure were posed facing away from the camera. Alternatively, a little judicious surgery would have easily removed these Kermit-diagnostic appendages.

It seems likely to me that Kermit presented irresistible 'little green man' possibilities to a prankster. 'Spencer' was then happy to present his grainy picture to the credulous UFO world, embellishing his story with a tall tale of seeing a departing saucer. I always knew there was something fishy – sorry, froggy – about that picture.

Nick Harling, Lancashire

Bovines and boiler suits

Following the review [**FT438:61**], I tracked down the *Encounters* series on Netflix. In general, I found it a well-researched and balanced look into four of the more puzzling UFO cases of the 20th century. Of particular note was the first episode, 'The Broad Haven Triangle', which focused on the series of strange events that took place in that particular area of Wales in 1977. What struck me were two specific aspects of the phenomena which occurred again in two other cases elsewhere in the UK during the following years.

The Coombs family's report of the strange relocation of a herd of cows from a locked paddock, with the whole herd mysteriously turning up on a farm over a mile away with no clear explanation, bears some similarities to events in Todmorden in 1980.

Alan Godfrey's initial call on that night was to locate a herd of cows that were reported to be loose on a housing estate. He eventually found them in a field by the side of the road on which he would have his famous UFO encounter. To my knowledge, it has never been fully established how they got there and whether or not these were the same cows previously reported as being loose.

The second element of the phenomena from the Broad Haven case that rang some bells was the description of an alleged entity spotted in a field. The entity was described as being dressed in a shiny, silver 'boiler suit' with accompanying visor over the face. In the *Encounters* documentary, a possible explanation for this is given as an individual wearing a specialist suit, designed for fighting high intensity fires at power stations, such as the one at Milford Haven, not far from the epicentre of events. The documentary suggests that the individual in question may have deliberately 'borrowed' the suit and worn it out into the fields as a prank, purposely playing into the heightened sense of fear and hysteria in the community at the time. Readers may remember that the idea of a person wearing a specialist silver fire-fighting suit and setting out to scare others, presumably well aware of how alarming this attire would appear to the untrained eye, was mooted as an explanation for the Risley 'silver man' sighting reported by Ken Edwards on 17 March 1978, just over a year after the start of the Pembrokeshire phenomena.

The fact that these two specific elements crop up in three unrelated cases across a three-year period is interesting. Are we looking at three events linked by the same 'entities' or 'intelligence' that carried out aspects of the same behaviour in three unconnected locations in front of witnesses who were unaware of the previous events? Or, from a sceptical point of view, could the reports of the incidents from the Broad Haven area, widely reported in the press, have fed into the narratives of the two other cases, creating a connection that never existed? Maybe a herd of cows in a field is just that, made more unusual by the wider context.

Either way, it's not difficult to see that the witnesses in each of these cases at least believes that they saw something that they were unable to quantify. I find the parallels intriguing.

Aaron Bulley
By email

Reincarnation

I much enjoyed the article 'In Search of Past Lives' by Simon Young [**FT434:30-37**], but feel the need to raise an issue that always comes to my mind when we are regaled with stories of reincarnation. Many historians, the ones who are probably not much fun, have pointed out that since the arrival of agriculture in the Neolithic and its role as primary source of human food, some 8,000 to 10,000 years have passed and in that time approximately 90 per cent of our ancestors lived the life of subsistence farming. This is not reflected in the memories, hypnotically recovered or otherwise, of the reborn. Virtually no one seems to have led the short and hard-scrabble life on a small, family-held plot of land which, in reality, almost everyone did: though the author did have one life as a smallholder on an English moor, which is a start.

Mr Young mentioned a kind of celestial waiting room for the deceased as they prepare to return to this mortal coil. Is it the case that on the ethereal entrance to this room there is a non-corporeal note advising that only interesting people, not those who have led dull lives, need apply for bodily restitution? A cynical person (not me, I assure you!) might suggest that interesting lives would constitute ones which might sell documentaries, books or magazine articles (not yours, definitely not yours!).

I don't recall an article in FT going over the history of the subject, much as you did in **FT431:32-39**, when Nessie got a bit of kicking. I do recall how everybody who was reincarnated used to be Alexander, Cleopatra, Columbus, or some other member of the Great and the Good. Then it became one of Alexander's foot soldiers, Cleopatra's maids, or some syphilis-ridden sailor on the *Pinto*. Now we get quite a mishmash of people, just not enough farmers. Harumph.

I must point out that at 62 I'm getting on a bit, and possibly going on a bit. I suspect that at FT Towers the same can be said about Paul & Bob so, as we watch our better days recede into the past, we may look forward to meeting and discussing this matter… beyond the veil.

Yours from the apparently once-born.

Brian McTaggart
Dundee, Scotland

● With regard to reincarnation, I have two observations. One is the mathematical angle: wouldn't there be new souls showing up alongside older souls as the population increases? (Many people remember they were Cleopatra, but not a random Australopithecine.) And isn't it a vested interest to persuade people they only get one go around, to drive them into the shopping malls? The Protestant work ethic? Doesn't happen East of Suez...

James Wright
Southend on Sea, Essex

Left-right buttoning

Regarding Hitler's overcoat and buttoning on the 'wrong side', Dave Miles asserts that "the origin of men's buttons being on the right, so that the garment overlaps left to right, is in plates of armour" [**FT439:66**].

Hmmmm. In jousting, the participants 'hit' each other, approaching on the *left* side. So, having an edge to your harness is a *bad thing* when your attacker can shove a lance tip under and through to your 'meat.' Yup. So a left jousting plate will overlap a right one. Plate (or any other harness) is designed to take hits from any direction! However, outside jousting circles, we must look to practical usage.

In the UK, the traffic layout is that we drive on the left and see those travelling in the opposite direction coming towards us on the right. We approach 'traffic' on our right side with our right side.

Why? Long story but ...

A majority of men are right-handed. Thus, you carry a sword on your left to draw with your right. Cross-body, as it were.

When you carry a sword on horseback, it rests on your left hip. If nervous you'd hold the reins in your left hand, in order to keep your right available. Then, if you approach someone *also* on horseback and sword-armed, *both of you* have your sword-arm free.

So if a bloke carries a sword at his hip, it's on the left. A coat, which might cover the handle, should allow for a right hand to reach through to the weapon held on the hip without having to flip it aside... though it looks cool.

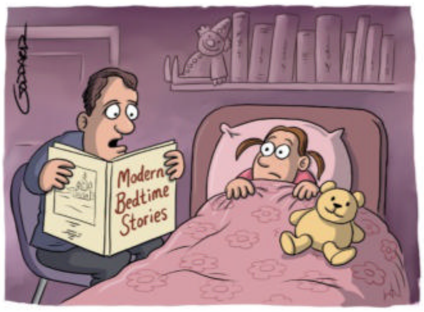
All this and it leads into fashion...

So 'blokes' wear overlapping fabric to allow the opening to be available to a right hand. Tradition. It's the 'done' thing. You left-handed? Life sucks... get used to it. This is the origin of male overclothing being folded from left to right. You a girlie-girl? You don't need access to your sidearm. Sorry – but this is the *historical* attitude, not mine.

And finally ...

Has anyone considered that the photo of Adolf has been mirrored? Being left-handed I've had to 'cope' being in a right-handed world. I don't expect the world to change for my convenience. But, let's face it – if you are a dictator then you can afford to *tell* the tailor which side you 'dress'.

Alan Cassady-Bishop
Filey, North Yorkshire



".. but the wicked witch cursed the beautiful princess with terrible Instagram photos and she lost all her followers!"

CLIVE GODDARD

It Happened to Me...

Readers write in with their own accounts of strange phenomena

Wandering passport

In November 2023, my wife and I took a winter sun trip to the island of Tenerife with a group of friends as a break from cold, wet northern England. We had a lovely room in a nice hotel in bustling Los Christianos. We were on the third floor and the room felt very secure, so we didn't bother renting a safe. Passports were tucked away out of sight in the bedroom, money was in money belts, all felt good security wise.

One morning, my wife Nicky, who is an early riser, woke me in a panic. She couldn't find her passport despite having put it safely away in the bedroom and having checked it the night before. She does tend to stress about losing things, but I was fairly relaxed about it as we had been the only ones in the room, and I was sure it would soon turn up. As time went on though, Nicky became more and more agitated and worried. I should say that I follow *Fortean Times* and was enjoying reading *It Happened to Me*, Book 2, on Kindle while we were away. The evening before I'd been reading the section entitled 'Pixilation', where people would inexplicably lose things, and having asked out loud for them to be returned, would miraculously then find them again, usually in plain sight. I should also say at this point, that my wife is very practical – "when you're dead you're dead" – no spirits, ghosts, UFOs or anything else of that sort exist in her world.

As Nicky's meltdown continued and the passport still hadn't been found, I thought I'd try a little experiment. I felt a bit self-conscious about it as I knew Nicky would think I wasn't taking this crisis seriously, so I stepped into the bathroom, shut the door and said out loud: "Could we have the passport back please?". Within a second, I heard "Found it" from outside. Nicky had found her passport inside the book she had been reading all morning. Had she absent-mindedly removed the passport from its safe place and put it in the book she was reading, then forgotten about it, then found it again just as I secretly asked for it back from the bathroom? Maybe. Anyway, I went back to the bathroom and quietly said, "Thanks for the passport".

Steve Watt
Hexham, Northumberland

ANDREW BOWDEN / FLICKR

My wife saw a hooded figure like a monk walk by the car

Just have faith

My brother lost his woolly hat two weeks ago. He has a number of hats, but this was his favourite, and in the recent bad weather he really missed it. He methodically searched the cupboard where it should be, then all possible shelves, hooks, pockets, worktops, drawers, car. Nowhere to be found. He canvassed places he had visited recently – shops, pubs, cafes, friends. Shops always have a collection of lost items, but the hat was not among any of them.

As time went on, relatives recommended that he should send prayers to (according to inclination), St Anthony, the Fairies, the Heavenly Props Dept. By now, willing to try anything, he did.

The next morning, there was his beloved hat, in the cupboard where it should have been, exactly where he had carefully searched first and on several other occasions.

Penny Heaton
Horsforth, Leeds

Avebury Monk and yellow flowers

On a visit to Avebury stone circle in the 1960s, I decided to look around the mediæval church (pictured above) nearby. We parked our car by the wall of the church and my wife, tired after much walking around the stones, decided to sit in the car while I visited the church. When I returned, my wife said that a hooded figure looking like a monk had walked by the car. She watched it walk towards the church gate, where it disappeared. She could see the church wall through it.

Several years later I was driving to Devizes on company business and stopped in Avebury to pick up an elderly man who was thumbing a lift. He was the curator of Avebury Manor and had just finished a daily check of the house. He told me that fresh yellow flowers were daily put in vases in the "Yellow Room', and on unlocking the door next day the flowers were regularly scattered around the floor. Also, furniture would often be rearranged overnight.

Peter Cawthorne
Widegates, Cornwall

Duke Ellington

When young, I used to go to the Sheffield Record Lending Library that contained a considerable selection of classical music (and some jazz). Every week, I borrowed two vinyl records to play on my scratchy record player. My taste in music was classical and rock (mostly of the prog rock variety – Pink Floyd, Yes etc.).

On one occasion I felt almost compelled to listen to some jazz. I picked up something almost at random and took it home with my classical record. On stepping in through the door, my mother immediately said to me – "Duke Ellington has died." I took the record out of the LP bag – a selection of Duke Ellington's music. My mother asked if I had heard – I said "No" (this was long before the Internet or mobile phones). Neither of us said a word. Ironically, I didn't even listen to it.

Dr Peter WH Smith
Watton At Stone, Hertfordshire

Final parting

In 2015, an old friend of mine died very suddenly and unexpectedly. Only a few weeks earlier, we'd met by chance and chatted briefly, concluding the conversation with our customary vow that "we must get together for a proper catch-up sometime".

We never did, and I was naturally devastated by his death. But, several months later, we *did* get together – in easily the most vivid and 'real' dream I've ever had in my life. My late friend was sitting on a wall beside a big, city centre river. While I didn't recognise the exact location, I got the impression it was somewhere familiar to him. I was one of several dozen people gathered around him in a semi-circle, and we were all waiting patiently to have a short, one-to-one conversation with him. We were all aware that he was dead, and that the experience was decidedly unusual. But the atmosphere was very good-natured, with everyone – including my friend – laughing and joking at the strangeness of it all.

When my turn came to chat

with him, I shook his hand and smiled, shaking my head disapprovingly at his sudden death. He shrugged apologetically and gave me a big smile. "I know, I know..."

"If you can do this, why can't you just come back permanently?" I asked.

"That's not how it works," he replied. "But because I went so suddenly, I've at least been allowed to come back and say goodbye to a few people."

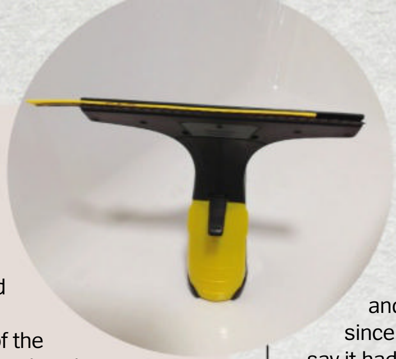
I cheekily asked exactly *who* had 'allowed' him to make this slight return, but he said it was hard to explain. He then gave me a hug and told me never to worry about anything.

At which point I woke up feeling absolutely bathed in love and reassurance. There had been none of the fractured logic and surreal jump cuts that normally feature in dreams. In fact, the whole encounter had felt like a completely everyday experience that took place in real time, with no 'oddness' other than the fact that my friend had returned from the dead. But even that was something we just casually acknowledged, as though it was nothing out of the ordinary.

I didn't recognise anyone else in the crowd, but we didn't have a huge circle of mutual friends. So I've often wondered if they were similarly real people who – that night – all had the same dream as me, all being allowed to say a proper goodbye to their friend while the rest of us watched respectfully.

Bob Fischer
Teesside

Rubber puzzle



One of my wife's brothers died two years ago at this time (November). He had been to the house once or twice, when he came down to the main hospital in the area for treatment for his cancer. I reported the following incident to the SPR.

Shortly after he died, in the early hours of the morning, 3-4am, I was woken up by someone knocking at the door. This was the day after he died and I put it down to local youths, on their way back from a party, because when we first moved into the house a couple of years previously, kids had rung the bell and knocked the door before running off.

The following morning at about the same time, I was again woken up, but this time by the doorbell being run; however, there was something strange about the sound that didn't seem right. I also noted that with both incidents, neither my wife nor the dog woke up.

Getting up eventually, I sauntered into the bathroom to find that the Karcher window cleaner and one of the doors of the shower had their rubber sections pulled out as shown in the photo. Neither had ever been like it before and have never been like it since. While I could dismiss the door phenomena being created by outside influences (kids), this was in the house and it would have meant either I or my wife did it – but motive escapes me and I refuse to blame the dog.

Tony Sandy
By email

Gospel apport

This happened when I was a young student at a small college of higher education in the early 1980s. I was not at my happiest at this time for various reasons and I got talking to someone at the college who was a devout born-again Christian. He said reading the Bible had helped him and though not religious I asked him what I might find helpful from the Bible. He said: "If you only ever read one thing, make it the Gospel of John." He claimed it had had a profound effect upon him.

I lived quite near to the college and so one morning a few days later when I woke very early I decided to go in, even though it was barely light. The doors were unlocked ridiculously early by the caretaker who I think lived on the site so the building was open long before most people, whether staff or students, began to arrive. (Security was a lot more relaxed in those days.) I went to sit in the refectory intending to get a coffee from the vending machine and enjoy the quiet before everyone started arriving and the day began.

The refectory was a large hall with long wooden tables each with about eight wooden chairs apiece. These were always placed on top of the tables by the cleaners the night before. I took down the chairs at my chosen table and those of about four other tables around about so as not to be sitting in a forest of chairs. Just as I reached for the last chair of the fourth table I heard a loud "SLAP" –the sound made when someone drops a pamphlet or magazine onto a table rather than just placing it.

Looking in the direction of the noise, I saw, there on the previously empty first table, a small, square, paperback. It was The Gospel of St John from The New Testament – the sort of booklet given out by churches to the congregation or to Sunday school children. I was a bit startled by this as well as 'weirded out' on finding it to be the very book that so recently had been recommended to me.

I have tried to explain this incident 'rationally', but have been unable to do so. Did the book fall from the seat of one of the chairs as I moved them? Well, it cannot have been the last chair as I had not even moved it yet. If it had fallen from the seat of one of the previous chairs it would have had to hang in mid-air for some time before landing when it did!

Did the caretaker or someone else walking through pick it up from the floor perhaps and throw it on to the table? It would have been strange that they never spoke to me even if just to remark on how early I was. Also, there were three doors to the hall, one was in front of me so I would have seen anyone coming or going through it, and the others were a good distance away to the back of the hall. After walking through the maze of tables, no one could have got to them and exited in time without me seeing them when I spun round to look – which I did. I heard no footsteps.

Was it the Christian (perhaps in as early as me) who had recommended the book to me? Again, the problem of his coming into the hall and leaving unseen would apply. Also, I think he would have spoken to me along the lines of "After our chat the other day I thought you might like this." I do recall that he lived quite a distance away, so was unlikely to be in that early. I never spoke to him about this later or asked him if it was him and he never mentioned it to me. I would also point out that this wasn't a theological college or one having a significant religious studies department, so was unlikely to have such publications hanging around.

I did read the book and have a few times since over the years. I can't say it had any real impact on me, but the fortean nature of the incident certainly did.

Dawn Jacobs
Basildon, Essex

Not my left foot!

Early one Sunday afternoon last February (2023) the weather was fine and dry and I found myself alone at home. My husband and grown-up sons were out, so I woke up 'Alexa' and asked her to play The Beatles *Magical Mystery Tour* album. I had the patio doors wide open and off I went into the garden. My large and overgrown buddleia was in need of a trim. I cut off the larger branches first; they were about 4ft [1.2m] long, so I cut them into smaller pieces to fit into our 'green' waste bin. While cutting the branches, I was standing with my head lowered watching the smaller bits fall onto the ground. I then had a strange feeling that someone was standing right next to me; I thought it was one of the boys who had returned home, taken off his shoes and had quietly come to stand by me while I was distracted and the music was loud. However, to my horror on the ground next to my own feet was a disembodied left foot, man-sized, in a grey woollen sock.

I screamed and ran back inside and locked the patio doors. The music was still playing full blast and my heart was pounding. I told Alexa to pause whilst I looked around my still empty house. I looked outside and no one was to be seen. I telephoned my sister Lily, who lives across the road, and I said, "You are not going to believe this". She asked if I was OK and did I want her to come over? I said I was going to have a cup of tea and that I was starting to calm down. She then said "What if an arm appears?" I said I would be moving in with her if any other body parts appeared. It took a while to calm down but I couldn't go outside for the rest of the day. By the way, we moved the buddleia once I had trimmed it – and it has since died.

Tracey Sillifant
Childwall, Liverpool

LETTERS

Lunar error

Noting Brian Perry's letter [**FT440:66**], the implication seems to be that there is something mysterious about the slowing of the Earth's rotation due to interaction with the Moon. This is certainly news to me, as the effect of tidal forces on a planet by its moon is well understood. Essentially, the bulges created on the planet (particularly the oceans in our case) by the Moon's gravity are subject to torque because the Moon is not stationary relative to the planet's surface where the bulges occur. Since the Earth rotates faster than the Moon orbits, the overall effect is a transfer of momentum between the two bodies, so the Earth's spin slows, the Moon picks up speed in its orbit and given enough time the two bodies eventually become tidally locked so that the same side of the Earth always faces the Moon, just as the same side of the Moon always faces the Earth. The whole process also releases energy, some of which – as Mr Perry suggests – dissipates as heat (or can be exploited in tidal power stations). An extreme example of the heating effect that tidal forces can inflict is seen on Jupiter's moon Io – the surface of which is plagued by volcanic eruptions to the point that the mining colony in the (excellent) movie *Outland* would not be a practical proposition.

Regarding the comments on infrared emissions by CO^2 molecules – I am by no means sold on the wisdom of reducing our emissions, and would caution *FT* against kicking a hornet's nest by indulging discussions on this topic. However, I do fear that your correspondent has misunderstood the mechanism: water vapour does indeed absorb radiation, but it does not significantly absorb infrared wavelengths in the ~8 to 14 micron range, which allows for a transmission window through the Earth's atmosphere, and the leakage of infrared energy back into space. CO^2 absorbs across part of this range (and re-emits at wavelengths outside the window). So the window gets smaller, and theoretically the dynamic equilibrium of 'sunlight in' to 'infrared out' gets shifted. I say 'theoretically' because the atmosphere is a complex beast where unexpected effects are the only reasonable expectation.

Ian I'Anson
By email

Old Oak

I don't know where anyone got the idea that Marc Lothian's mystery piece of wood [**FT440:64**] was some exotic Amazonian hardwood that had somehow floated across the Atlantic before being built into a mediæval castle, when what he describes as "a very deep dark brown central core about 10cm in diameter and the outer ring that was very light yellow about 5cm wide" is a perfect textbook description of Yew (*Taxus baccata*). Yew is about as native a British tree as you can get.

Liam Baldwin
Ballachulish, Scotland

A hairy man

I found this letter in an old newspaper and it struck me that modern BHM or hairy men sightings in the Internet age are based on slenderer evidence than the following:

"Hairy Man" of The Mountains Welsh Shepherds' Chase and Capture

The residents of Lleder Valley and the inhabitants of Dolwyddelen (Carnarvon) have been very much disturbed by strange manifestations on the adjoining mountains where, it was reported, the shepherds had seen a diminutive hairy man skipping from rock to rock and emitting strange sounds. The disappearance of fowls and fruit was associated with the strange visitor, and it was decided to promote a party to hunt the mysterious being and, if possible, to imprison it. The shepherds joined in the chase, and the adjoining mountains were carefully searched without result until the party reached the vicinity of Penmachno. Here Shepherd John Roberts of Talargerwin, was startled by a strange cry which came from behind a rock he was passing. Looking over he saw a strange animal, and struck it with his stick, rendering it insensible. It was then discovered that the "hairy man" was a monkey, escaped probably from some private "Zoo".

[*The Daily Citizen*, 27 June 1914.]

Richard Muirhead
By email

Too dismissive

I've seen several letters over the last couple of years complaining that *FT* is being too sceptical. I fear that Dr Paul Lee's article [**FT437:38-41**] goes further than that and introduces insufferable smugness to the table. His article insults a large number of people who take a serious interest in the 'spectral nation' and who give of their time and effort to investigate. Are they sometimes confused or misled? Yes. Do they deserve to be savaged by Dr Lee? No.

Take me, for instance. About 20 years ago I attended one of the ghost tours he vilified. Why did I go along? Because of *Most Haunted* and a general interest in the paranormal. The event was led by two mediums, but the group gave some very sensible guidance about how the investigations should progress and the session finished with everyone getting together to discuss results. Were there some people who claimed every creak, groan and crunch was the spectre of Jack the Ripper? Yes – but none of those claims were made by the organisers. Were there people attending who just wanted to be scared? Of course. But those people only tended to go once. Personally, I hadn't experienced anything (nor had the friends I was with), but we all wanted to learn more – and so we went on more investigations. And after a while, we had some experiences that none of us could explain. Some were scary, some were funny, some were just weird. But at no point did we make assumptions. We tried to look for explanations and more things ended up with a mundane explanation than not. As we attended more investigations, we worked with the same people several times and those people had a methodical approach and were just curious about the paranormal.

After a time, I got invited to be part of another group that took a more scientific approach. We had a couple of members who were sensitive, but everyone approached the investigations with the view that what we wanted was proof. To that end, we would research the buildings and areas we were visiting, looking for histories of hauntings, events in the local area and newspaper reports. We did our best not to misinterpret anything that we found.

Dr Lee makes a wide variety of assumptions about amateur investigators – they are too dumb to understand their equipment; they will accept the 'utterances' of mediums or psychics over historical documentation; and, of course, they will believe Derek Acorah.

Businesses prefer to respond to people who are going to pay them rather than take the time to reply to Dr Lee? And charge people to use their premises? How shocking! Businesses, especially those concerned with hospitality, are going through a time of economic crisis and are doing whatever they can to make money.

The work that Dr Lee has done is both interesting and valuable, but it is undermined by his smug attitude. Let's face it, we all hate what *Most Haunted* did, and anyone who takes investigations seriously keeps as far away from it as possible.

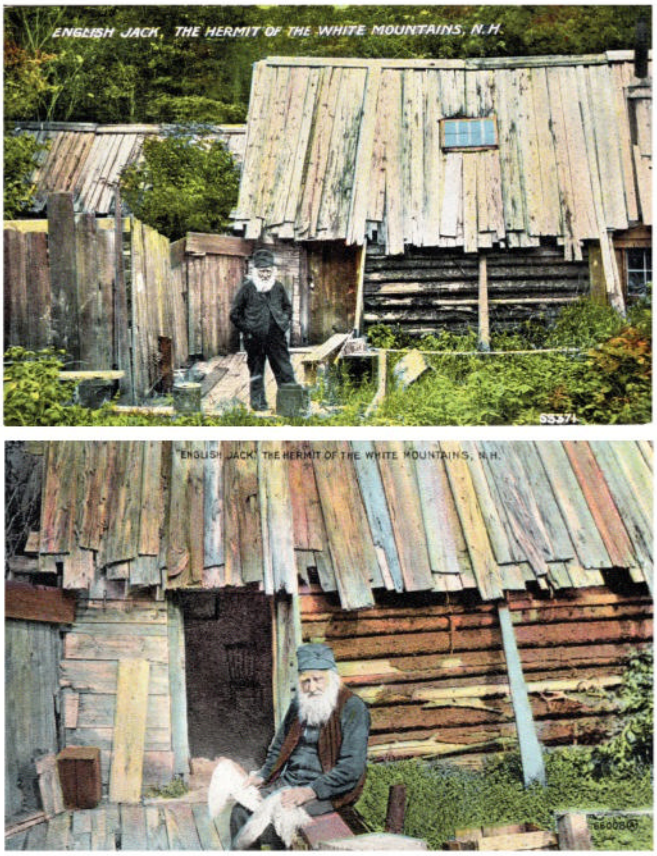
Andy Barkham
By email

PECULIAR POSTCARDS

JAN BONDESON shares another deltiological discovery from his prodigious collection of postcards. This month's pictorial blast from the past recalls the life and adventures – whether real or invented – of a notable New Hampshire hermit

42. ENGLISH JACK

Some months ago, I purchased some American postcards of English Jack, the Hermit of the White Mountains, New Hampshire, in front of his bucolic hermitage. It turned out that Jack was something of a local celebrity: when he died in 1912, allegedly at the age of 90, the *New York Times* published his obituary. For years, he had lived alone in his ramshackle shed, which he called his 'ship'. An unkempt-looking, white-bearded old man, he was known for his reclusive nature and eccentric habits. He was still hale and hearty in his old age, and fond of hunting, trapping and fishing. He kept a corf of trout near his hermitage, and often cooked one of these fish for dinner on his primitive fireplace. He sometimes astounded visitors by biting the head off a fish and eating it raw. If they paid him extra, he produced newts and snakes and treated these hapless animals in the same manner, tearing their heads off with his powerful teeth and devouring them with relish.


ENGLISH JACK, THE HERMIT OF THE WHITE MOUNTAINS, N.H.
S5371
"ENGLISH JACK" THE HERMIT OF THE WHITE MOUNTAINS, N.H.
E6008

LEFT: Two postcards showing English Jack in front of his hermitage. The bottom card has the inscription: "This Hermit died in 1911 or 1912, I am told. A very popular character. Edith Thomas."

English Jack was also fond of telling yarns about his youth in England, and his astounding nautical career. He had been born in London, he claimed, but by the age of 12 was a homeless orphan. He had tried to become a sailor, but was rejected since he was too young. One day, he met the five-year-old girl Mary Simmonds, who had been left behind after her thoughtless father Bill Simmonds had jumped onto a horse-drawn omnibus while in conversation with another mariner, without missing his little daughter. After Jack had managed to halt the omnibus and reunite Mary with her father, the grateful Bill Simmonds gave him a berth on board his ship, as a cabin boy. For eight years, these two sailed together without any mishaps. But when Bill and Jack boarded the *Nelson*, bound for the Indian Ocean, Mary and her mother had forebodings that all would not be well on this voyage. Bill and Jack pooh-poohed their concerns and sailed away.

In the Indian Ocean, the *Nelson* was wrecked in a hurricane, and only 13 of the ship's company of 42 survived, Bill and Jack among them. They were marooned on a desert island for 19 months. There was fresh water, but nothing to eat apart from mussels, limpets, crabs and snakes. When Bill expired from disease and privations, his dying wish was that Jack would take care of his wife and Mary. In the end, Jack and two other surviving sailors were rescued by an American ship; the two others soon died from disease, leaving Jack as the sole survivor from the ill-fated *Nelson*. He went to London in search of Mary and her mother, only to find that Mrs Simmonds had died and Mary had been put in a workhouse. Jack removed her, and promised to marry her as soon as she was old enough. Having installed Mary in a respectable school for young ladies, and paid her board for a year, Jack embarked on a ship bound for Hong Kong. When he returned, after several months, he was told that Mary had fallen ill and died the previous month.

The heartbroken Jack joined the Royal Navy, where he claimed to have enjoyed an adventurous career. In Africa, he fought the slave-traders; in the frozen Arctic, he helped to search for the lost ships of Sir John Franklin; he served in the Crimean War and the Indian Mutiny. After many years in the Navy, Jack went to the US, where he settled in the White Mountains, in a primitive hut he had constructed himself. He hunted, fished and brewed strong beer made from hops and roots, with which he sometimes regaled his admirers, telling them stories of his eventful life for a small gratuity. When English Jack died on 24 April 1912, his name on the gravestone was given as John Vials, aged 85. An Internet researcher has discovered that no John or Jack Vials/Vialls/Viles was included in the normally reliable US Census returns, suggesting that the hermit might have been buried under an assumed name.

Indeed, British genealogical records have nothing to relate about any John or Jack Vials (or variations to that name) being born in the 1820s. Nor is anything recorded in the press with regard to the alleged shipwreck of the *Nelson*, with considerable loss of life, in the 1840s. Was English Jack perhaps not a saintly hermit, but rather a man of mystery who liked to enliven his performances as a 'geek' with some sensational seafaring yarns that he made up as he went along?

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FORTEAN TIMES is a monthly magazine of news, reviews and research on strange phenomena and experiences, curiosities, prodigies and portents. It was founded by Bob Rickard in 1973 to continue the work of Charles Fort (1874–1932).

Born of Dutch stock in Albany, New York, Fort spent many years researching scientific literature in the New York Public Library and the British Museum Library. He marshalled his evidence and set forth his philosophy in *The Book of the Damned* (1919), *New Lands* (1923), *Lo!* (1931), and *Wild Talents* (1932).

He was sceptical of dogmatic scientific explanations, observing that some scientists tended to argue according to their personal beliefs rather than the rules of evidence and that inconvenient data were ignored, suppressed, discredited or explained away. He criticised modern science for its reductionism, its attempts to define, divide and separate. Fort's dictum "One measures a circle beginning anywhere" expresses instead his philosophy of Continuity in which everything is in an intermediate and transient state between extremes.

He had ideas of the Universe-as-organism and the transient nature of all apparent phenomena, coined the term 'teleportation', and was perhaps the first to speculate that mysterious lights seen in the sky might be craft from outer space. However, he cut at the very roots of credulity: "I conceive of nothing, in religion, science or philosophy, that is more than the proper thing to wear, for a while."

Fort was by no means the first person to collect anomalies and oddities – such collections have abounded from Greece to China since ancient times. **Fortean Times** keeps alive this ancient task of dispassionate weird-watching, exploring the wild frontiers between the known and the unknown.

Besides being a journal of record, **FT** is also a forum for the discussion of observations and ideas, however absurd or unpopular, and maintains a position of benevolent scepticism towards both the orthodox and unorthodox. **FT** toes no party line.

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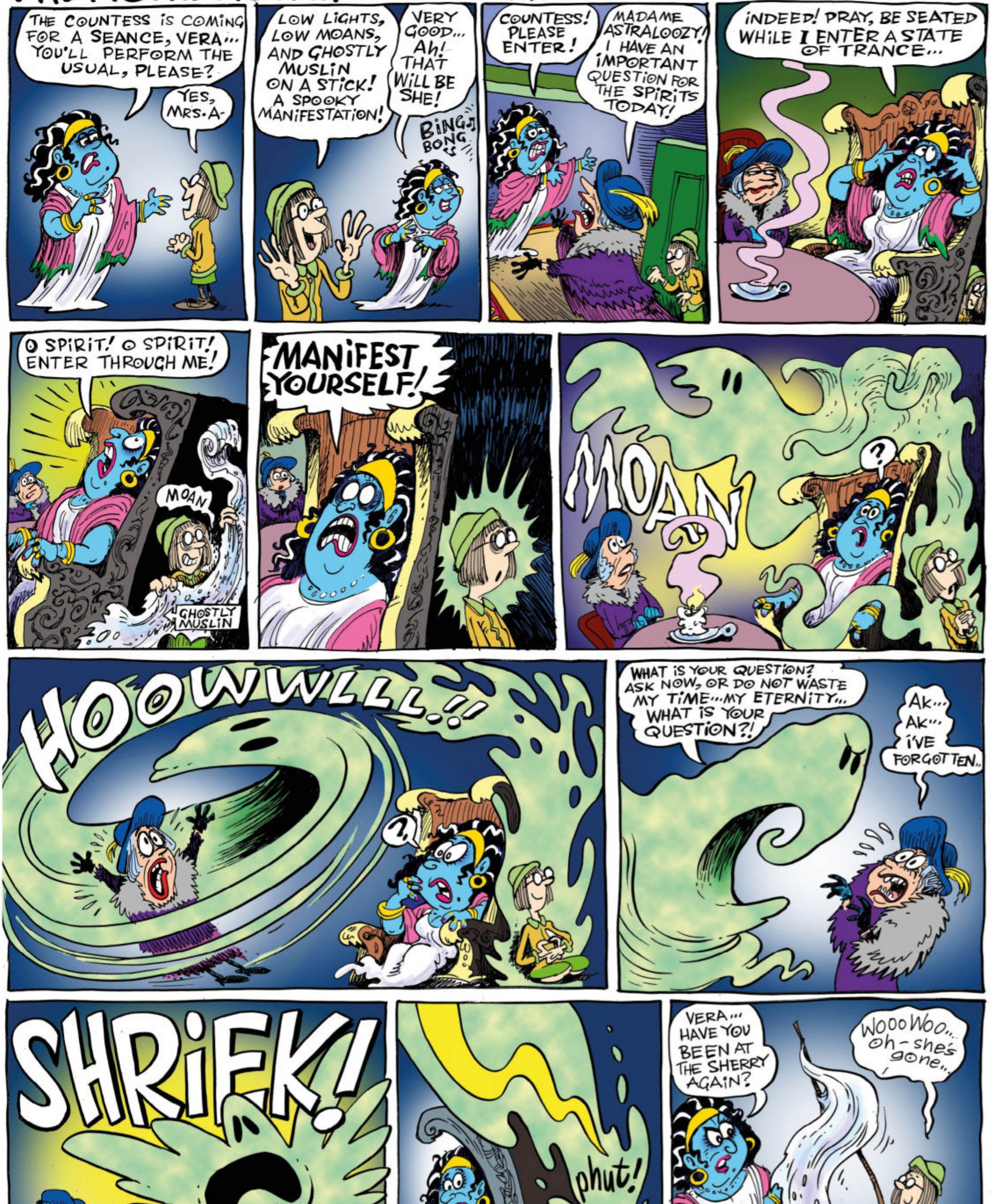
PHENOMENOMIX

Mme ASTRALOOZI = GHOSTLY MUSLIN

HUNT EMERSON


THE COUNTESS IS COMING FOR A SEANCE, VERA... YOU'LL PERFORM THE USUAL, PLEASE?
YES, MRS. A-
LOW LIGHTS, LOW MOANS, AND GHOSTLY MUSLIN ON A STICK! A SPOOKY MANIFESTATION!
VERY GOOD... Ah! THAT WILL BE SHE!
BING BONG
COUNTESS! PLEASE ENTER!
MADAME ASTRALOOZY! I HAVE AN IMPORTANT QUESTION FOR THE SPIRITS TODAY!
INDEED! PRAY, BE SEATED WHILE I ENTER A STATE OF TRANCE...
O SPIRIT! O SPIRIT! ENTER THROUGH ME!
MOAN
GHOSTLY MUSLIN
MANIFEST YOURSELF!
MOAN
?
?
HOOWWLLL..!!
?
WHAT IS YOUR QUESTION? ASK NOW, OR DO NOT WASTE MY TIME...MY ETERNITY... WHAT IS YOUR QUESTION?!
Ak... Ak... I'VE FORGOTTEN..
SHRIEK!
phut!
VERA... HAVE YOU BEEN AT THE SHERRY AGAIN?
WOOO WOO... oh - she's gone..

COMING NEXT MONTH

COMMUNIST CORPUSCLES

TOTALITARIAN ABUSES OF SCIENCE

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MIRACLE CURES AND MASS MEDIA

+ FORT'S NEO-ASTRONOMY, CURIOUS CALLING CARDS, ZOANTHROPIC PEOPLE AND MUCH MORE...

FORTEAN TIMES 444
ON SALE 18 APRIL 2024

STRANGE DEATHS

UNUSUAL WAYS OF SHUFFLING OFF THIS MORTAL COIL

In Salmi, Gujarat, India, 10-year-old Dipak Thakor was playing with friends near a temple in the village when he was attacked by a "notorious gang" of monkeys who had already assaulted three people in the previous week. One of the monkeys dug its claws into Thakor's abdomen and inflicted serious injuries. An official said: "His intestine was ripped out in the attack. He rushed to his house and was taken to a hospital where doctors declared him dead on arrival." Forestry officers are now trying to capture the marauding langurs to relocate them to an area where they will not come into conflict with humans. *dailymail.co.uk, 16 Nov 2023.*

Hongchi Xiao, 60, of Cloudbreak in California, has been extradited to the UK and charged with the manslaughter by gross negligence of Danielle Carr-Gomm, 71, following her death on 20 October 2016. This took place while she was taking part in a slapping therapy workshop run by Xiao at Cleeve House, a hotel in Wiltshire. Carr-Gomm hoped that the therapy would cure her diabetes, as she struggled to inject insulin due to a fear of needles. The workshop involved *paidan lajin* therapy, during which patients are repeatedly slapped, or slap themselves, for an extended period. This is often done with a hard bundle of canes and rattan, which swiftly causes severe bruising. Participants also undergo periods of painful forced stretching on a wooden bench. The pain from the slapping and stretching is claimed to activate the body's self-healing powers to "expel toxins" and help with various afflictions. Previously, Taiwanese authorities had fined Xiao NT$50,000 (£1,000) for "promoting folk remedies as medically effective" after he claimed that diabetic patients did not need medication and could be cured with *paida lajin*. *Paida lajin* has also been linked to the death of Aidan Fenton, 12, in Sydney, Australia, in 2012. Like Carr-Gomm, he was diabetic and was believed to have stopped taking his insulin before the therapy. *BBC News, 30 Nov 2023.*

On 7 January, Ricky Johnson, 38, Clayton McGeeney, 36, and David Harrington, 37, went round to their friend Jordan Willis's house in Kansas City, Missouri, to watch their local football team, the Kansas City Chiefs, defeat the Los Angeles Chargers. After the game, Willis, 38, says that he wished his three friends goodnight, leaving them to head out into the sub-zero night while a fourth guest lingered for a while before he, too, left, and Willis went to bed. The next day Willis, a protein scientist working in HIV research, says that he got up and worked from home and then did the same the following day. Meanwhile, Johnson, McGeeney and Harrington had not been seen or heard of since leaving Willis's house, and relatives set out to find them.

Eventually, two days later, on 9 January, McGeeney's fiancée went round to Willis's property and found one of the missing trio dead on the back porch. She called the police, who swiftly found the other two men dead in Williss' garden. Willis, though, claims to have remained completely oblivious to the fact that three of his friends had died on his property until the police knocked at his door. He said that he had failed to notice people looking for the men, because he wore earphones and kept a loud fan on while sleeping, and that he had not noticed that two cars belonging to his friends remained parked on the street outside his house. "He had no knowledge that they remained in his backyard or that they needed medical attention," said his lawyer. Police have not found any signs of violence in or around Willis's property and were not treating the case as a triple homicide. Adriana Juarez, the mother of Johnson's son, said "None of the stories are adding up about what he's saying. How do you not know there are three bodies on the back porch?"

"There are still a lot of unanswered questions and understandable scepticism as far as an explanation for how this happened," said Tony Kagay, the McGeeney family's lawyer. Some light was thrown on the case when toxicology reports revealed THC, cocaine, and fentanyl in the victim's bodies, after which Willis checked himself into rehab, but the police also reported discovering multiple personal items of the three men in his house, which did nothing to allay suspicions that Willis was involved in their deaths. Kagay said that he would "feel nothing but sympathy" if Willis was "blameless", but that it would be "very hard to explain" how he could "not realise what happened to his friends" when they were "frozen in his backyard for two days." *mirror.co.uk, 23 Jan; theguardian.com, 24 Jan; foxnews.com, 6+8 Feb 2024.*

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